Studying abroad: social mobility or social reproduction? Examining the strategies of Chinese international students in Toronto.

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Abstract

Students around the world are increasingly mobile in their educational pursuits, with many moving out to move up. The People's Republic of China (PRC) is experiencing a "studying abroad fever"—it is the world's number one country of origin for international students. Using semi-structured interviews, this research explores the education migration narratives of international students from the PRC at two universities in Toronto, specifically their international higher education (IHE) experiences and shared realities during their time studying abroad. It unpacks the relationships between students' IHE experiences, their family situations as well as institutional influences, all of which co-constitutively shape their perceptions about future career trajectories and social position in the PRC. I argue that contrasting the dispositions and socialization experiences of both Chinese elite and non-elite families sheds light on student education migration experiences and reveals diverse yet competing trajectories within the evolving institutional landscape of the PRC.

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Acronyms

BFSU Beijing Foreign Studies University
CBIE Canadian Bureau for International Education
CCG Center for China Globalization
CCT Career Capital Theory
CSC China Scholarship Council
GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education
GRE Graduate Record Examination
IELTS International English Language Testing System
IHE International Higher Education
IT Information Technology
SAT Scholastic Aptitude Test
PRC People's Republic of China
UT University of Toronto
WES World Education Services
YU York University

CHAPTER ONE — INTRODUCTION

In the current context of globalization and internationalization, the search for higher education is motivated by more than just knowledge acquisition, and has taken on a new significance, as "people are moving out for education to move up" (Kim & Kwak, 2019, p. 3). Students around the world today are becoming increasingly mobile for their education, overcoming the geographical and resource limitations that previously constrained their access to studying abroad. In many Asian countries, the perceived benefits of international higher education (IHE) to students and families' future wellbeing outweigh the convenience of geographical proximity and much cheaper tuition fees for domestic higher education (Waters, 2005). IHE has received and continues to receive ample research attention, generating comprehensive knowledge networks of scholars trying to understand the motivations and nuances behind the student migration experience (King & Raghuram, 2013).

The People's Republic of China (PRC) has the status of being the world's number one country of origin for international students, sending 608,400 post-secondary students abroad to study in 2017 (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2018). According to the Annual Report by the Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the PRC has consistently been the top sending country to all major Western destination countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada (CCG, 2018). Fueling the rapid expansion of IHE in the PRC today is the country's booming economy, notably, the prospering Chinese middle-class families who can afford upscaled post-secondary education at the international level (Mok & Wu, 2016; Ortiz, Li, & Fang, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009). The nation's middle-class families have been experiencing a "study abroad fever" due to their high regard for Western universities as

well as the impression that obtaining Western university credentials and overseas experiences will reward graduates with a competitive employment advantage and a worldly status back home in the PRC (Chao et al., 2017; Jiang, 2013; Zha, 2015; Zweig, 2006)

Access to IHE has not always been as extensive in the PRC as it is today, and the improved access to IHE has implications for the country's transforming social structure. IHE got its start in the PRC beginning in 1978 as a government-sponsored program that was rigorously regulated and financially exclusive to a rather small population (Xiang & Shen, 2009). Because of the political, social, and economic constraints that existed at that time, the pursuit of IHE had always been attached with symbolic meaning that was potent in constructing a hierarchy of status. However, the nation's economic vitality today has rendered IHE largely a commercial investment and alternative to domestic higher education (Zweig et al., 2008). The popular demands for IHE and the commercialization process feed into each other and have significantly improved access to IHE for those who can afford it. As a result, IHE is now accessed by both elite and non-elite families in the PRC, with the latter emerging as a dominant force in IHE participation (CCG, 2018).

The literature on this topic has included a large quantity of publications focusing on and beyond the PRC to examine the differences in IHE participation between elite and non-elite families, as well as the impact of their participation on social stratification (Xiang & Shen, 2009; Yang, 2018). Notably, there is an ongoing intellectual debate in which researchers have asked whether IHE is primarily a strategy by elites to reproduce their class advantage or an opportunity for non-elites to improve their current social status (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Kim, 2010; Waters, 2015; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009; Yang, 2018). Within the

debate, IHE is suggested as a precious form of education or channel to which access is limited but capable of contributing to one's family status. Reviewing the literature also reveals that the two contentions within the intellectual debate both rely on two premises: 1) IHE is believed to provide a competitive edge for overseas returnees who seek employment in their home country; and 2) IHE experience is inseparable from one's family situation, and the two factors shape one another. For example, some Chinese international students prioritize family well-being over self-interest by studying what their parents consider as prominent for future employment; similarly, family's network connections are powerful in shaping or even determining students' employment trajectories (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Waters, 2009).

However, for current and future Chinese international students, pursuing IHE in exchange for better employment prospects may no longer be such an effective strategy, introducing new tensions into the current intellectual debate (Guan et al., 2016; Hao, 2011; Hao & Welch, 2016). According to the 2018 CCG Annual Report, the number of returning Chinese overseas graduates has already outpaced the number of Chinese international students going abroad (CCG, 2018). The report also reveals that nearly 80% of the country's international graduates in 2016 returned to the PRC, even though the country already finds its labour market struggling to provide sufficient and suitable employment opportunities. This continuous influx of returning Chinese overseas graduates increases the competitiveness of the PRC labour market, reducing returnees' chances for employment.

Moreover, the significant influence of one's family situation on the IHE migration experience has to be understood in relation to the emerging power of Chinese middle-class families and the resource advantages of elite families. Since IHE and overseas expenses are a

significant investment for many Chinese families, and since much Chinese participation in IHE is self-funded (95%), it is valuable to understand the incentives behind this IHE migration, to what extent students from different family situations possess different narratives, and whether Chinese families of different backgrounds have adapted strategies accordingly to the changing employment prospects for overseas returnees in the PRC (Gu, 2015).

These changing dynamics of IHE participation require further investigation at the student level to understand how individual Chinese international students fare during their studies abroad. Specifically, what are their motivations for studying abroad, what has influenced their decision-making for IHE, have they experienced changes while abroad, and what are students' and their families' expectations of their IHE experiences? Unpacking the education and career narratives developed during their studies will help us understand their motivations for choosing to study abroad in the first place, discern whether their aspirations change during their time abroad, and their motivations to contribute to their families' social positions. This research explores how Chinese international students' dispositions and socialization experiences affect and are affected by their experiences during their study abroad.

Since families of different backgrounds arrive at the same decision to send their children to study abroad—involving numerous factors that could contribute to or constrain students' education aspirations and career strategies and result in diverse individual experiences—I intend to map out the dispositions of some Chinese international students. Examining individual narratives can shed light on their various dispositions. Doing so helps me understand how their socialization experiences through education and aspirations for future reflect the PRC's existing social system. Specifically, I ask:

1). What are the factors shaping Chinese international students' IHE incentives and experiences?

2). How do students from different family backgrounds perceive their IHE in relation to their family situations and future employment prospects in the PRC?

3). What are the strategies and tactics students and their families use in navigating IHE?

4). To what extent is IHE deployed to consolidate or improve a family's current social position in the PRC?

Based on the interview findings and analyses of 19 student narratives, I argue that *the contrasting dispositions and the socialization experiences between Chinese elite and non-elite families lead to their divergent IHE migration experiences, unveiling their diverse and competing trajectories through an evolving institutional landscape in the PRC*.

Research Significance

This research complements the emerging Geography scholarship that bridges the concepts of mobility and capital to IHE literature (Kelly & Lusis, 2006; King & Raghuram, 2013; Leung, 2013; Waters, 2006; 2008; 2009; 2012). It extends the scholarly discussion of the pivotal role of family situation during the education migration journey of Chinese international students (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Waters & Leung, 2012; Waters, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009; Yang, 2018). I demonstrate through empirical findings that although IHE is a form of education Chinese students from diverse family situations engage in, family social status and dispositions determine to a large extent the value of IHE to individual students and their families. This

research distinguishes between elite and non-elite dispositions by analyzing the diverse ways in which students and their families are approaching IHE.

Although the definition of elite is fluid as it involves different privileges in the economic, political, cultural and social spheres, this research is based on students' self-identification, which emerges from their personal experiences. Examples include participation in unique cultural activities, education discourses and utilization of social capital. These aspects correspond to what the literature reveals about elites' participation in education migration, notably research by scholars who deploy Bourdieu's theorization about education socialization, cultural reproduction and social reproduction (Waters, 2009; 2010; 2012; Xie et al., 2018a; 2018b). In particular, my analysis of elite IHE participation draws inspiration from Johanna Waters' (2006; 2009; 2012) rationalistic conceptualization of international student mobility as the new geography of cultural capital—learning across spaces—by elite families to entrench social inequalities. However, the majority of my interviewees self-identified as non-elite, depicting themselves as coming from "normal" or working-class families when I asked about their personal situations. While some of these students reported their limited access to resources that support their IHE pursuit, others mentioned that they undergo extensive negotiations with their parents or that they rely on specific policies in order to gain studying abroad and employment opportunities (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Yang, 2018). These non-elites' navigation of IHE echoes Peidong Yang's (2018) non-rationalistic interpretation of international student mobility by non-elite students, and addresses the dynamics between students, families, resource inadequacy and institutional involvement.

More broadly, this research theorizes social stratification in a transnational context in light of the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1973; 1986) and Michel de Certeau (1984). It offers empirical insights into the evolving landscape of IHE as it relates to the PRC, its social structures and its linkages across borders. It details how Chinese international students' diverse family situations and their (in)abilities to capitalize on family resources distinguish the IHE experiences between elite and non-elite Chinese families. Specifically, I highlight different scalar strategies and international mobility regimes by examining the dispositions and the socialization experiences of Chinese international students studying in Toronto.

The question of scalar strategies comes from scholars who advocate that migration research should not separate local, regional and global levels. Instead, they analyze them as mutually constituting conditions that reflect restructuring changes at each level (Glick Schiller, 2015; Moskal, 2017; Xiang, 2013). Such an approach signifies conceptualizing a relational process between place and migrant experience through considerations of how different scales shape the educational mobility of migrant students (Moskal, 2017; Williamson, 2015). A multi-scalar approach is critical to making sense of the connection between Chinese middle-class families' newly developed transnational strategies and the societal changes currently occurring at the national level in the PRC. The framework brings together the changing PRC social structure, the social production of Chinese families, and the implications surrounding IHE participation by students of different social status (Xiang & Shen, 2009).

In this research, I focus on the different scalar strategies deployed by elite and non-elite families. Specifically, I analyze how family situations create opportunities and barriers, which lead individual students and their families to adopt different views and approaches to IHE

(Darvin & Norton, 2014; Leung, 2013; Waters 2006; 2009; 2012). For non-elite families, I document a new perspective instrumentalizing higher education abroad as part of a scalar strategy. In contrast, elite families have shown a scalar strategy based on prestige, privileged connections and world-class experiences. In order to maintain their social status and reproduce their advantage through IHE, elite Chinese families focus their IHE pursuits on status distinction and elite socialization when facing the IHE participation competition from non-elite families.

These scalar strategies are part of shared perspectives of how mobility across borders can be used. International mobility regimes offer a connection between international student migration, family social status, and their motivations for studying abroad. As a set of norms and practices used by people of the same background in order to cross borders for specific purposes, the notion of an international mobility regime can be applied to student migrants' strategies and highlights contrasting motivations and approaches to studying abroad (Ruggie, 2002, p. 85). Such a notion is implied in the work of Waters, who attempts to better understand the elite mobility of Chinese international students involved in IHE (Waters, 2006; Waters & Brooks, 2010). It is also grounded in the work of Bourdieu (1986), who theorizes on how such regimes speak to questions of capital accumulation and conversion. In light of his work, others have documented how students and their families are navigating the stratified landscape of studying abroad based on a different set of norms about international mobility (Findlay, 2010; Findlay et al., 2011; Leung, 2013).

Given that Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes cultural capital as class consumption, I explore how international student mobility for IHE is utilized for different types of capital accumulation practices between elite and non-elite families. I discover in this research the keen

interest of elite families in fine-tuning the accumulation of institutional and embodied cultural capital through IHE, while non-elites focus on overcoming obstacles in order to obtain IHE opportunities and convert their education investment into career. I highlight how elite socialization during studying abroad is part of a conversion formula to help children from elite families alleviate their concerns for future employment. I describe the international mobility regime of elite families whose children are involved in IHE as horizontally accumulating, one that converts their cultural and social capital in order to maintain their power in society. This involves expanding or deepening the resource advantage that they have already established within their network. In comparison, I describe non-elite families' international mobility regime as vertically accumulating valuable cultural capital from IHE that is intended to be converted into other capital for future power negotiations.

More specifically, this research advances the existing literature that argues that there is a trend of IHE participation for social mobility purposes by non-elite families. In addition to conceptualizing the emerging non-elite Chinese families as improving their social mobility through IHE, I also highlight the reproductive elements of their IHE participation. As I illustrated by Xiang & Shen (2009), social stratification in the PRC is still in the process of production instead of reproduction. By conceptualizing IHE as the new cultural site of competition between the elites and non-elites, which is revealed by my analysis of the scalar strategies and mobility regimes that they deploy, I argue that the contrasting dispositions and the socialization experiences between Chinese elite and non-elite families unveil their power contest through a stratified landscape of IHE participation in the PRC.

I deepen the analysis of this power contest happening in the PRC by using a new proposed Bourdieu-de Certeau framework. In the context of IHE participation, this framework softens the institutional boundaries between class socialization in the Bourdieusian framework by introducing a level of fluidity or dialogical relationship between the dominant and subordinate social groups. While the elites still possess institutional advantages, non-elite Chinese families have assumed a new cultural strategy by dominating IHE as an educational alternative to ensure their children have better opportunities.

The Bourdieu-de Certeau framework also extends the rationalistic and institutional interpretation of IHE migration and IHE experiences by those studies that deploy only or predominantly Bourdieu's theorization (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2006; 2008; 2009; 2012). Although fruitful, as echoed by Yang (2018), using only the Bourdieusian framework risks a deterministic viewpoint that IHE will linearly lead to social reproduction or social mobility. This way of analyzing student narratives not only captures strategic elements but is also effective for making sense of the narratives of those who navigate their IHE without strategic or long-term planning. This invites an exploration of the fluidity, malleability, unpredictability, opportunity, and negotiation that occur during students' studies abroad.

Additionally, this research highlights the connections between three institutional factors specific to the PRC: *gaokao*,[1] the "wild chicken" phenomenon (hierarchy used to rank Western universities), and the metaphoric shift in how returnees are described and how they shape

[1] *Gaokao* is recognized as the world's first standardized educational examination, established in 1952 in the newly-formed PRC. This national university entrance exam has since then functioned as the most important assessment for around nine million Chinese high school graduates annually. This "high-stake" test is critical for a student's university admission outcome and his or her future after graduation (Muthanna & Sang, 2015).

Chinese students' IHE and future career trajectories. In a Bourdieusian framework, institutions are understood as malleable structures or patterns emerging out of the socialization and power relations among agents in a given society (Bourdieu, 1986; Naidoo, 2004). Institutions take shape in both formal settings, like universities, and informal settings such as the norms that regulate agent behaviours based on shared values. While I conceive of agents in this research as Chinese international students and their families, institutions are *gaokao*, the emerging hierarchy among Western universities, and local perceptions towards returning Chinese students. Regardless of family situation, all Chinese international students and their families have to respond to and strategically navigate the institutional landscape for their desired education and career outcomes.

I contend that these institutional factors are critical to understand the paths of Chinese international students and how the PRC remains the largest international-student-sending country globally. Additionally, these institutional factors have profound implications on the stratified landscape of IHE participation and returnees' employment prospects in the PRC. On the one hand, avoiding *gaokao* to seek educational alternatives is becoming a new cultural strategy by the emerging Chinese middle class to entrench social stratification in the PRC. On the other hand, *gaokao* drives an expansion of IHE happening at the secondary and post-secondary levels, which leads to the emergence of the "wild chicken" phenomenon and institutional hierarchy among Chinese international students. Both *gaokao* and the "wild chicken" phenomenon have implications on Chinese overseas returnees' employment

prospects, which are captured by the metaphoric shift referring to returnees from "sea turtles" to "seaweed".[2]

This research sheds light on the situated and dialogical aspects within students' voices during their studies. Not only does this exploration offer empirical nuances at the individual and contextual levels, they have helped me explore the relational, collective, and intersubjective realities among Chinese international students. Integrating these two aspects enhances my theorization of IHE migration by illustrating the co-constitutive relationships between PRC state policies, family backgrounds and influence as well as students' ideas about social status, higher education, credentials and employment. My focus on student perceptions during their studies also contributes to the literature that primarily focuses on students' career prospects after their studies, providing insights into the career-shaping processes that develop during studies abroad.

Asking Personal Questions—What I and Other Chinese International Students Think

As a Chinese international student in Canada for over six years, I note that my own IHE experience has been inspirational and instrumental to this research design and development. Speaking of my own experience, my parents' opinions and expectations are crucial, and they can never be separated from my education opportunities, career trajectory, and how I vision my future social position. IHE was a decision initiated and decided by my parents, and I know that my IHE experience carries significant meaning, making it worthy of the significant amount of money my parents have spent to fund my overseas education and all the sacrifice of past and future years of long-distance separation between my family and me. However, during my time

[2] "Sea turtle" is a positive connotation about returnees that was popularly used to describe overseas returnees in the PRC. However, with the number of returnees increases and the quality decreases, returnees are now often referred to as "seaweed" because of their replaceability and ubiquity.

abroad, my perspectives regarding my education have changed and begun to diverge from those of my parents, leaving me to reflect often on the following questions: What is the meaning of my IHE to my parents and to me? What obligations do I have as a migrant student to my family's future? How will my IHE affect my future differently than it does the futures of other Chinese international students? And, how will my IHE distinguish me from those who remained in the PRC? Being surrounded by many Chinese international students during my studies makes me wonder about their experiences and perceptions. What do they think about their IHE experiences and how are their families' opinions and expectations affect and are affected by their IHE experience? Moreover, how are Chinese international students influenced by external factors such as state policies and labour market prospects?

These introspective questions bring me to explore the everyday meanings of IHE for individual Chinese international students and to what extent their IHE narratives can be understood through a broader level of theorization. I build my theoretical framework on the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau. Bourdieu's concepts of dispositions and socialization shed light on the intersubjective, collective, and shared realities emerging out of student narratives to help me unravel the linkages between the individual and the structural. I am also drawn to de Certeau's attention to the *Practice of Everyday Life* by different societal groups in order to reveal the diversity and contrasts among individual stories of IHE. My methodological framework is inspired by post-positivist and social constructivist commitments, which have led to my selection of semi-structured interviews as the instrument for this research. I interviewed 19 Chinese international students studying at two universities—the University of Toronto and York University—in Toronto.

Thesis Overview

In Chapter 2, I delve into the existing literature on IHE and student migration across disciplines. By combing through the theoretical underpinnings and empirical findings, I separate the literature into two main branches: in one, studying abroad is primarily a strategy for elites to reproduce their social advantage; in the other, it is primarily an opportunity for non-elites to improve their social conditions. However, the literature is less effective in capturing the complexity of student voices and the career-shaping processes Chinese international students experience during their studies abroad. This has led me to focus on their dispositions and socialization experiences to discern the dynamism within their narratives.

In Chapter 3, I demonstrate that this research is inspired by my own study abroad experience as a Chinese international student, as well as my everyday interactions with other Chinese international students. I then detail the obstacles to and critical contributions my experience as a Chinese international student and my positionality as a researcher and the researched have made to this research. My personal connections to this research topic are part of what intrigue me about the diversity, fluidity, intersubjectivity, and complexity of student narratives, which have guided my methodological design and the selection of semi-structured interviews as the ideal research instrument. In Chapter 4, I present the empirical findings from my semi-structured interviews, with the goal of revealing the diversity, contextuality, and interconnectedness within student narratives. This chapter depicts the dynamism of decision-making during IHE between students and their parents, while also highlighting the various extents of influence from institutional and state factors.

In Chapter 5, I explore individual and family dispositions between elites and non-elites, while revealing the shared realties and socialization experiences among certain individuals. The chapter is structured based on the elite and non-elite features I identified and analyzed based on my interview narratives. In Chapter 6, I explore an evolving institutional landscape emerging from the participation of IHE in the PRC by revealing that the dynamism between institutions and student families is transforming IHE as a new cultural site of competition between the Chinese elite and non-elites. I dedicate three subsections that respectively focus on *gaokao*'s implication to Chinese international students' IHE paths, institutional expansion at secondary and post-secondary international education in the PRC, and the shifting colloquialism that suggests the changing socialization experiencing regarding overseas returnee's employment prospects in the PRC.

CHAPTER TWO — LITERATURE REVIEW

International higher education (IHE) started in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a government-sponsored program that was rigorously regulated; however, today, the nation's booming economy has rendered it largely a commercial investment and an alternative to domestic higher education (Zweig et al., 2008). Xiang and Shen (2009) reveal that dramatic social stratification in the PRC makes Chinese people think that Western university credentials and overseas experiences will translate into an employment advantage in the increasingly competitive PRC labour market. The perceived benefits of IHE to students and families' future wellbeing outweigh the convenience of geographical proximity and much cheaper tuition fees from domestic higher education (Waters, 2005).

Many researchers have debated whether, on the one hand, studying abroad is primarily a strategy for elites to reproduce their social advantage, or, on the other hand, primarily an opportunity for the non-elites to improve their social condition (Chao et al., 2017; Hao & Welch, 2012; Ortiz et al., 2015; Waters & Brooks, 2010; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Recent literature on this matter has shown that studying abroad does little to guarantee high-quality employment in the PRC (Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Welch et al., 2016). Labour market prospects are changing, and one's family situation is a significant factor shaping an overseas returnee's career success and future social position (Hao & Welch, 2012; Hirano & Rowe, 2016). *Despite the literature's extensive investigation of IHE impacts on the PRC's social structure, it under-examines the diversity and complexity of student narratives, specifically student experiences while studying abroad and their shared realities.* This has led me to focus on using the theoretical tool of dispositions and socialization to discern the dynamism within student narratives.

This chapter starts with the two main contentions in an intellectual debate that I identify in the literature based on how IHE has been theorized as strategies deployed by families of different backgrounds. I then reveal the two premises that underpin the intellectual debate: 1) the significance of parental intervention in studying abroad, and 2) changing employment prospects for contemporary Chinese returnees. I then identify four research areas that require further investigation and briefly explain how this thesis research will help address them. Finally, I present the theoretical frameworks I use to formulate my research intent and questions.

Studying Abroad, an Instrumental Strategy for Social Class Reproduction

> "*Education is as much about social privilege and reproduction of social difference as it is about training the mind.*"— Findlay et al., (2012)

The provocative statement by Findlay et al. provided above calls into question the very nature of education's effects—disseminating knowledge and promoting social mobility. Many scholars who grapple with the true impacts of higher education on economic and social (in)equality support this view (Havemen & Smeeding, 2006; Kerckhoff, 2001; Marginson, 2016; Torche, 2011; Triventi, 2013). The adverse effects of higher education on equality is hardly a new phenomenon, and IHE, a burgeoning field, draws on a growing body of theoretical and empirical investigation. Fueling the rapid expansion of the multi-billion-dollar IHE industry is the transnational mobility of millions of students worldwide (King & Raghuram, 2013; Waters, 2009). It is through this mobility, and for the purposes of education and its associated new geographies of cultural capital—learning across spaces—that geographers have contributed the

most to the contention that IHE entrenches social inequalities (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Waters, 2006).

Johanna Waters (2006; 2009; 2012) argues that transnational educational mobility transforms the spatial scale at which elite parents exercise their choice of higher education for their children. Unrestrained by any national boundaries around higher education, many students from the PRC travel far for higher education in Western countries (Leung, 2013). Echoing other researchers, Waters further contends that this newly developed 'taste' for studying abroad is a calculation for the transnational reproduction of a family's social status (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009). PRC parents mobilize their various forms of capital to help their children obtain cultural capital abroad (Findlay et al., 2012; Tsang, 2013; Waters, 2006; 2008). To many Chinese families, the symbolic value and power of foreign credentials (one form of cultural capital) outweigh educational interest and knowledge acquisition (Waters, 2008). It is beneficial to briefly review the concept of cultural capital for its connection to transnational education mobility and social stratification, which describes a structure in which people are categorized in a hierarchy based on their status, power, and wealth (Marginson, 2016; Triventi, 2013; Yeung, 2013).

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of culture as class consumption points to the process of social reproduction: the regeneration of existing social advantage that reinforces social stratification by transmitting the advantage from one generation to the next (Kerckhoff, 2001; Martin & Spenner, 2009; Nash, 2003). Bourdieu delineates cultural capital into three sub-categories: institutionalized (education credentials), embodied (tastes and habits), and objectified (cultural goods) (Kelly & Lusis, 2006). He explains that families of the same class

status tend to acquire comparable institutionalized and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973). This stratified nature of cultural capital accumulation is statistically supported: among the less than 2 percent of the total university student population in the PRC that have access to Western post-secondary education, 95 percent are self-funded (Choudaha et al., 2013; Gu, 2015; Xinhua, 2017). This significant financial requirement excludes all but wealthy families, and subsequently, the unevenness of IHE mobility is a reflection of a social practice of class disparity (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Findlay et al, 2012; Waters, 2012).

Not surprisingly, cultural capital accumulation and its convertibility, that is, the scale at which cultural capital is converted into each form of capital, are maximized within society's top stratum (Waters& Leung. 2013; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Conversion does not happen organically, and it is conditioned by social and political institutions in the PRC (Xiang & Shen, 2009). To date, the Chinese socialist system, namely, old Maoist social institutions, remain a major mediator of symbolic capital, apportioning political, social, and economic values to the cultural capital possessed by the elite (Tsang, 2013; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Tsang specifies two institutional systems—*danwei* (work unit) and *hukou* (household registration)—to demonstrate how PRC parents exploit their socio-political connections in order to achieve an inter-generational reproduction of privilege through higher education. Similarly, Waters (2009) reveals that localized social capital is frequently deployed in the Hong Kong labour market to valorize the overseas credentials possessed by more privileged social groups, conferring additional value and even altering the consequences for individuals' employment outcomes. These two studies adhere to the contention that IHE is inherently stratified, from cultural capital accumulation to conversion. The significant financial requirement excludes the majority of PRC families from

accessing IHE; however, even for those who are fortunate enough to have studied abroad, it is convertibility, as contributed by family status and connections, that determines the value of their cultural capital.

Studying Abroad: An Opportunity for Social Mobility

The class differentiating nature of studying abroad inevitably results in varying learning outcomes, as students from different social classes (re)negotiate their class positions during IHE (Darvin & Norton, 2014). A combination of literature and reports shows that students from less affluent families also actively engage in IHE, indicating their belief in its potential to stimulate social mobility (Kim, 2010; Li, 2017; Ortiz, Li & Fang, 2015; Yang 2018). According to World Education Services (WES), the number of outbound international students worldwide from upper-middle income families increased 161 percent from 2000 to 2013, followed by a 140 percent increase in in outbound mobility by low-income families. Outbound mobility from high-income families experienced the smallest increase, about 25 percent (Ortiz, Li, & Fang, 2015).

Middle-class families from countries across Asia are driving the growing demand for overseas education. Kim (2010) investigates the transnational schooling experiences of middle-class families from South Korea. Kim used *kirogi*, a Korean nickname meaning wild geese, to describe those migratory families that endure significant emotional and financial sacrifices in exchange for potential future betterment of their children. In addition to documenting the contrasting education experiences between migrant students from different family backgrounds, this study captures the transforming geographies of educational options for middle-class families by showing their high rate of participation in overseas education. Similarly,

Yang (2018) investigates a group of Indian students who are from non-elite backgrounds and are constantly (re)negotiating their class identity during overseas medical studies. Yang criticizes the overemphasis on a rationalistic interpretation of student mobility and demonstrates the complexities of educational migration by non-elite families—a constant tension between resource inadequacy, educational aspirations, and mobility objectives. By theorizing and mapping the transnational education mobilities involving less affluent students and their families, the author sheds light on the educational experiences and social interactions that diverge from the dominant perspectives. (i.e., IHE entrenches social inequalities).

Middle-class families in the PRC have drastically scaled up their budgets for post-secondary education, making IHE affordable (Chao et al., 2017; Mok & Wu, 2016; Ortiz, Li, & Fang, 2015; Xiang & Shen, 2009). The Center for China and Globalization (CCG), an independent think-tank in Beijing, claims in its 2018 Annual Report that the PRC remains the largest international-student-providing country, and the nation's middle-income families have become the largest consumer group for IHE. Less concerned by finances, most of these families seek IHE as an 'easy option' for obtaining moderate prestige from foreign universities and a way out of the rigidity and hyper-competitiveness of the domestic education system (Chao et al., 2017; Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Fong, 2011; Mok & Wu, 2016).

The PRC's domestic higher education system has undergone a recent expansion and reforms, opening up far more educational opportunities and producing nearly eight million domestic graduates in 2017; nevertheless, families remain the most important factor in determining elite university attendance in the PRC (Jia & Ericson, 2017; 2018; Ministry of Education, 2018c). Using data from a nation-wide survey, Li (2007) argued that students from

politically privileged and high-income families have the best chance of entering top universities in the PRC, whereas low-income families endure the heaviest financial burden for domestic higher education, followed by middle-income families. Facing this dilemma, IHE becomes a more attractive alternative for families that have sufficient savings and children who fail to enroll in a high-ranking Chinese university (Hu & Cairns, 2017).

Significance of Parental Interventions in Studying Abroad

Researchers have emphasized the significant role of one's family situation in education decision-making (Bodycott, 2009; Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Supple & Small, 2006; Waters, 2005; Wong & Liu, 2010; Wu, 2014). In this context, family situation can be understood as the role of family members in shaping students' education trajectories, which includes family members' socioeconomic status, educational and professional background, support and advocacy, as well as their expectations for their children (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Pleet-Odle et al., 2016). Family situation is particularly relevant in a traditional Confucian society like the PRC, where substantial decisions like education are often a family, if not primarily a parental, endeavour (Fong, 2004; Waters, 2015). It is important to understand the cultural influence of Confucian socialization on education decision-making and its implications for social stratification.

Confucian heritage is deeply rooted in PRC society (Bodycott, 2012; Choi & Nieminen, 2013). Central to Confucian teaching is the concept of filial piety, which accentuates children's respect and obedience toward parental authority, even at the cost of one's own wishes (Deutsch, 2006). Filial piety creates a reciprocal relationship between parents and children on education matters, whereby parents try their best within their capabilities to prioritize education for their children, ensuring the best education possible, and in return, children are

morally obligated to honour their parents' instructions, therefore rendering students far from being autonomous in making decisions about their own education (Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Chou, 2010; Waters, 2015). This reciprocal relationship has significant implications for Chinese international students because family concerns about future prosperity far outweigh knowledge acquisition and student interest gained from studying abroad (Waters, 2008). As a result, the matter of education is hardly at the student's discretion, given such parental interventions.

As filial piety is a reciprocal process, students' perceptions and responses to parental interventions are also important in motivating them academically (Guan et al., 2016; Lindstrom et al., 2007; Sun, McHale, & Updegraff, 2017). Bodycott's (2012) survey findings show that 100 percent of his Chinese student respondents described their parents as strategically carrying out family discussions to persuade them on education matters. Interestingly, his interview data revealed a unanimous understanding among student interviewees of their parents' standpoints. Although some students reported that their parents ignored their preferences, all believed that their parents were acting in their children's best interests and for the family's needs. Furthermore, there was a small group who even believed that the family's future well-being hinged on their (that is, the children's) educational achievements. Students' very positive feedback on the question of parental interventions resonates with the notion of filial piety from Confucian teaching, according to which parents instruct, and children obey. Recall that the very definition of social stratification derives from a hierarchy of status, power, and wealth; such a structure requires a back-and-forth between generations of successful accumulation and safeguarding of family resources (Marginson, 2016; Triventi, 2013; Yeung, 2013). This makes

the family situation an indispensable factor in understanding the relationship between studying abroad and social stratification in the PRC.

Filial piety is foundational to understanding how education socialization functions in certain Chinese families and social reproduction through education. Since many Chinese parents perceive studying abroad as an attractive path for their children's and families' long-term prosperity, they intervene in, and in some cases, solely manage, IHE school applications while strategically infusing family values into students' educational aspirations (Bodycott, 2009; 2012; Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Yang, 2007). Chinese parents' strategies can range from subtle manipulation to assertive commands to ensure that students choose the programs of study and universities that parents perceive as "appropriate" (Bodycott, 2012). Parental interventions also extend beyond education planning and are frequent even after graduation, having a continuous impact on students' career planning (Singaravelu et al., 2005; Wong & Liu, 2010). Fong (2004) and Deutsch (2006) explain that the extensive parental interventions in many aspects of Chinese students' lives can be largely attributed to the PRC's *One-Child Policy*. Although this policy is no longer in place, it continues to affect the contemporary generation of Chinese international students and returnees; having only one successor to raise, PRC parents feel compelled to make sure that this only child grows into a 'winner.' With so much at stake in their child's education, parental perspectives and interventions in the decision-making of studying abroad and students' career trajectories are not to be taken lightly.

Significance of Changing Employment Prospects for Current and Future Chinese Returnees

Employment prospects, generally determined by a balance between labour market supply and demand, is among the most commonly used factor to estimate overseas returnees' education and career outcomes (Berntson, Sverke, & Marklund, 2006; Green & Turok, 2000; Mason, Williams, & Cranmer, 2009). While new research continues to suggest the positive career potential of overseas returnees, the past several years have seen the literature re-evaluating returnees' employment prospects in a transforming PRC labour market (Hao et al., 2017; Hao & Welch, 2012; Sun, 2013). Commonly reported within the literature is a sharp increase in returnee quantity but a decrease in returnee quality (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016).

The PRC has been receiving an increasing influx of overseas-trained talent. Chinese Ministry of Education statistics reveal that 480,900 international students returned home in 2017, accounting for 79 percent of the total international Chinese graduates that year (CCG Annual Report, 2018). The population of international returnees continues to expand as more middle-class families become capable of financing IHE as an alternative to domestic higher education. In response, the country's labour market is reaching a more mature phase, where Chinese employers now have the opportunity to be more selective of candidates' credentials, skills, and experiences (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; Zweig & Han, 2010). This greatly reduces returnees' chances of securing a job by relying only on their Western credentials, especially for individuals with less work experience and graduates from lesser-known institutions or from a less specialized program of study (Hao, 2011). As a result, the relative scarcity of individuals who have foreign credentials is diminishing and the perceived employment competitiveness of those who do have foreign credentials is decreasing.

Strong competition from domestic graduates also reduces returnees' chances of obtaining satisfying employment (Hao et al., 2017). The reforms and expansion of the country's domestic higher education system since 1998 have significantly improved its quality and exponentially increased enrollment numbers (Hayhoe & Lin, 2008; Zha, 2009). According to Chinese Ministry of Education statistics, 4,528 higher education institutions in the PRC supplied nearly 8 million university graduates in 2017 (Ministry of Education, 2018b; Ministry of Education, 2018c). Within this enormous talent pool, rivalry is particularly strong among graduates of the C9 League, which is China's version of the Ivy League, consisting of nine of the most prestigious and influential universities in the PRC (Fang & Li, 2010; Yang & Welch, 2012). Due to their exceptional achievements during the extremely competitive national university entrance exam, g*aokao*, Chinese employers regard these C9 League graduates highly and tend to prefer them over returnees (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; Yang & Welch, 2012).

Even among those who have successfully completed their studies and returned home confidently, employers report that many returnees struggle to re-adjust to the PRC environment (Blackmore, Gribble & Rahimi, 2017; Louie, 2006; Zweig & Yang, 2014). Re-adaptation in this case means more than assimilating into the social, cultural, and professional environments after living overseas for years. It also entails the ability to transfer what returnees have learned from their IHE experience to serve local PRC demands (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016). The majority of recent returnees, many of whom have little if any work experience either at home or in their host country, nonetheless aim for higher positions and salaries (CCG, 2018; Hao and Welch, 2012). This is because many believe that by having foreign credentials and international experience, they have "seen the world"; however, the PRC's fast pace of

development is hardly comparable to they would have remembered four or five years ago, especially in tier-one cities like Beijing, Guangzhou, and Shanghai (Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016; Louie, 2006). Success in the contemporary PRC requires a solid understanding of contemporary PRC government policies, market trends, and the competency to combine Western and Chinese knowledge without facing integration challenges (Louie, 2006).

Literature Gaps and Research Needs

After extensively reviewing the literature on IHE and international student mobility, I have identified four research gaps in relation to their impact on social stratification. First, despite the fact that IHE strategies are deployed across borders, their spatial dimensions—specifically the use of scalar strategies by elite and non-elite Chinese families as well as the influence of international mobility regimes in their decision-making processes—have been underexamined. Xiang and Shen (2009) argue that the case of international education in the PRC for social stratification is unique compared to other developing countries and regional economies in Asia because the PRC is still in the process of producing, rather than reproducing, social inequality. With the country's booming middle-class economy, its social class formation and closure processes are still underway. Consequently, the PRC context is less about how IHE contributes to perpetuating an established stratification structure, but rather how it reflects the rise of a new and developing structure. Elite and non-elite Chinese families deploy different scalar strategies and are influenced by various mobility regimes while engaging in the same activity: student migration for IHE purposes. This study will offer a more comprehensive and pragmatic

understanding of these differences of what is a seemingly shared experience, which will help unpack the existing and changing relations between IHE and social stratification in the PRC.

The second gap in the literature is that it examines IHE for its social impacts mostly on a theoretical level, which seldom allows for the complexity of student voices to be heard. Sin et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of delving into the fine-grained and diverse narratives of individual international students in order to effectively understand the implications of their experiences for the broader social class system. Chinese international students may not be fully inclined to see their experiences as either reproducing social class advantage or improving social mobility (Chao et al., 2017). For this, I intend to explore the situational aspects of student narratives, teasing out the contextual, partial, individual, relational, and other empirical nuances that will help improve any theorization about the meaning of Chinese student migration and their expected return to the PRC upon graduation. This situated aspect will help me highlight the specific geographical implications such as state influence and the local context for credential evaluation.

Third, the literature primarily focuses on students' career prospects after their studies, neglecting the career-shaping processes that take place during their studies abroad. Unpacking the education and career aspirations that students develop during their studies will help us understand their motivations for choosing to study abroad in the first place, and to discern whether their aspirations change during their time away. This gap will be addressed by my focus on the dialogical aspect of student narratives. By dialogical, I mean the socialization experience and intersubjectivity that are part of the IHE experience. This dialogical aspect will complement the aforementioned situated aspect in revealing the shared realities within

students' perceptions, highlight their relationships and the mechanisms in shaping students' education and career trajectories, as well as their motivations to contribute to their families' social positions.

Fourth, although the literature on the institutional connections between IHE and social stratification is extensive, it centres the discussion mostly around the strategic operation of IHE by international students' families from different backgrounds. This largely ignores the narratives of those who exploratively pursue IHE as they encounter unexpected opportunities and challenges. I suggest that many Chinese international students decide to study abroad without a pre-determined objective, and therefore to various extents navigate their IHE experience with some degree of unpredictability. One's experiences studying, working, and utilizing family resources to optimize one's and one's family's social status are not always planned ahead or associated with strategic planning. The accidental, coincidental, and unintentional aspects within the IHE narratives by Chinese students, and international students in general, have not been sufficiently addressed, particularly narratives coming from non-elite families (Yang, 2018). This gap in the literature undermines its validity in producing pragmatic and holistic knowledge.

Habitus, Agency, and Disposition: Implications of Varying Purposes of Studying Abroad

Pierre Bourdieu (1986) conceptualizes societies through the concept of habitus. Habitus represents a social system in which agents act based on various hierarchies that structure the social world (Nash, 1990). The concept of habitus has been adapted by scholars in diverse and specific forms; some examples include the habitus of transnational professionals (Waters, 2007),

academic habitus and Chinese habitus (Mu, 2016), habitus of educational mobility (Waters & Brooks, 2011), familial habitus (Waters & Leung, 2012), and habitus of Chinese international students (Wang, 2018). Although habitus is long lasting, it is not a permanent system and it has a malleable nature (Hilgers, 2009; Sayer, 2009). The state of habitus influences and is influenced by the state of agency, a collective term representing individual capacity to act on one's own will, despite the overarching effect of habitus (Scollon, 2001). Subsequently, a reciprocal relationship emerges, with the two sides being adaptable to each other. The habitus-agency dynamism has become a foundation for a large number of scholars using Bourdieu's teachings and attempting to understand how societies and individuals respond to each other (Darvin & Norton, 2014; King & Raghuram, 2013). As I have shown in the aforementioned literature debate, this dynamism intertwines with IHE participation; together, they have implications for phenomena such as social reproduction, social stratification, and social mobility.

Socialization through education particularly interested Bourdieu, as he argued that education constitutes a powerful site for understanding social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986). He explains that education, as a socialization process whereby agents learn how to think and act, helps them acquire skills, experiences, and resources that are valued by others, and helps them navigate the social system. In Bourdieu's teachings, cultural capital is one important resource that agents gain from education that can be converted to and from two other primary forms of capital—economic and social—for reproductive purposes (Nash, 1990). Through these conversions, social groups strategically maintain and transmit their tangible and symbolic resources to the next generation. This cycle constitutes Bourdieu's influential theorization of cultural reproduction and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1973).

Some scholars have criticized the concept of habitus for being too theoretical and for reducing the complexities of the empirical world to a highly abstract and detached perspective (Nash 2003; Reay, 2004). As such, Bourdieu's concept of dispositions might be a more productive starting point to examine social stratification in the PRC through Chinese international students' IHE experience. Dispositions are a set of endurable manners and tendencies that guide the behaviours of social agents, and they usually reflect the social position of agents within the social system, or habitus. In Bourdieu's framework, habitus gives rise to characteristic dispositions and related practices of social agents, which are acquired through various socialization processes (Nash 2003). Nash's (2003) proposed scheme of structure-disposition-practice centres disposition between habitus and agency to interrogate the effectiveness of socialization through education. As such, dispositions are a more concrete tool to examine how agency is positioned in relation to habitus by looking at how Chinese international students and their families socialize within the social system through their participation in IHE.

Within this Bourdieusian perspective, the strategy of studying abroad can be reflective of agent dispositions socialized within a constraining social system. Structured conditions largely determine family situation, including the type of material and symbolic assistance students receive from family members. These conditions are unevenly distributed among students with different family backgrounds, but they are important in providing the needed resources for students' academic and professional development, while shaping students' own education aspirations, strategies, and sense of responsibility. Aside from the significant financial requirements of IHE, which already exclude more than 98 percent of the university student

population in the PRC, those that have such opportunities are still positioned in uneven conditions throughout their education (Gu, 2015; Xinhua, 2016). Waters and Brooks (2010) used the term “accidental achievers” to describe a group of students who disinterestedly go abroad to study in world-class universities and ultimately reproduce class privilege. To them, studying abroad becomes an aesthetic disposition of the privileged, and they have no explicit intention to use education for social reproduction.

The strategy of studying abroad can also be indicative of the transformative agent dispositions and socialization within the social system, as for Bourdieu, individual dispositions do not always reflect what the habitus dictates (Reay, 2004). The transformative nature of dispositions captures some PRC middle-class families’ eagerness to send their children to study abroad, with the intention of improving the family’s current social status. Recall that the Annual Report by the CCG in 2018 reveals that middle-income families have become less constrained by finances in their education selection, and their numbers have consistently grown to become the largest consumer group for studying abroad. It has been argued that this increasing demand for IHE among non-elite Chinese families has the potential to stimulate social mobility (Kim, 2010; Yang 2018). By disrupting the elites’ limited access to IHE to secure quality employment, these non-elite dispositions and the associated strategies are set against the conditions that the social system imposes.

Bourdieu’s framework for dispositions and socialization through education is institutional in the sense that he focuses on deciphering the correlative and deterministic relationships between the collective and the individual, or the macro and the micro. Although Bourdieu’s primary concerns are class and structural issues, some scholars, notably critical

feminists, have adapted more subjective and gender-based dispositions to "loosen" Bourdieu's theorization (Chambers, 2005; Laberge, 1995). However, I maintain that Bourdieu's greatest contribution to the area of my research is precisely his emphasis on the institutional relationship between dispositions and socialization. Translating this institutional conceptualization into the IHE context, we observe the contrasting strategies deployed by students and families of different backgrounds, as well as their dispositions to make contrasting impacts on the PRC's social system.

Strategy and Tactic: Entanglements with Competency Development

Recent studies have revealed more unplanned behaviours among Chinese international students, meaning that it is increasingly common for them to pursue IHE without predetermined goals and strategic planning for their futures (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Sablina, Soong, & Pechurina, 2018; Tharenous, 2015).[3] These IHE behaviours do not demonstrate a rationalistic and institutional approach to education migration, and therefore cannot be effectively interpreted as socially reproductive or transformative dispositions. This is what is missing in Bourdieu's framework, and thus invites investigation in order to make sense of the less strategic but more exploratory dispositions by Chinese international students and their families. Instead of "loosening" Bourdieu's institutional and rationalistic frameworks for my analyses, I complement them with the *Practice of Everyday Life* by Michel de Certeau, specifically his delineation between strategy and tactic. While strategy represents the overarching schemes

[3] Chinese international students are still strategic in preparing for their IHE, but the research shows that many of them do not possess strategies on how to leverage their education after completing their overseas degrees, nor do they anticipate family pressure regarding their education.

calculated by dominant groups in relation to power structures, tactic comprises the contingent decision-making by subordinary groups to constantly be on the lookout for opportunities (de Certeau, 1984).

The frameworks by Bourdieu and de Certeau share some common ground. De Certeau describes the dominant groups in societies as producers and the subordinary groups as consumers. Similar to Bourdieu's theorization concerning class issues, strategy and tactic are the "ways of operating" by producers and consumers to negotiate their respective resources and power (de Certeau, 1984, p. xix). Moreover, similar to Bourdieu's theorization of the socially reproductive and transformative dispositions and socialization processes, de Certeau acknowledges that consumers are active in both conforming to and challenging the disciplinary mechanisms and rational orders imposed by producers. While sharing these terrains makes it possible to merge the theoretical frameworks by Bourdieu and de Certeau, my analysis will benefit the most from de Certeau's recognition of tactic, a missing area in Bourdieu's framework. The notion of tactic extends my analyses of IHE experiences by incorporating the opportunistic, less predictable, and more malleable dispositions.

This newly proposed Bourdieu-de Certeau framework for examining IHE experience is novel and potentially transformative. Using only the rationalistic and institutional Bourdiesian frameworks risks a deterministic view that IHE will linearly and inevitably lead to social reproduction or social mobility. This risk was identified by Xiang and Shen (2009), who have warned that it is too simplistic to assume that international students are necessarily pursuing a linear development of social stratification in the PRC. The Bourdieu-de Certeau framework contributes to our current knowledge about the IHE mobility of Chinese international students,

and does so by addressing two of the research gaps I identified earlier. First, delving into the tactical navigation of IHE while students are abroad, the framework leads to the dialogical aspect that I propose to investigate the fluidity and malleability of students' education and career aspirations during their studies (gap number three). Similarly, recognizing that some students navigate their IHE without a pre-determined objective, the notion of tactic directly targets the accidental, coincidental and unintentional aspects of their experiences (gap number four).

To better grasp the difference between tactic and strategy in concrete term, I refer to the *career capital theory* (CCT). CCT is devised for assessing one's employment competitiveness and has been used to understand the connections between the study abroad experience and Chinese international students' career outcomes (Brown & Wond, 2018; DeFilippi & Arthur, 1994; Tharenous, 2015). According to DeFilippi and Arthur (1994), who first proposed CCT, individuals succeed in their careers by strengthening three primary types of competencies: knowing-how**,** knowing-who, and knowing-why. This categorization of competencies is applicable to all international students and returnees. Their knowing-how competencies include, but are not limited to, institutional academic training, English language skills improvement, cross-cultural knowledge, international perspectives, and overseas work experience. Their knowing-who competencies include academic, career, and personal networks established in both the host and home countries. Lastly, knowing-why includes changes to students' self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-discipline. Tharenous (2015) has used CCT to categorize the competencies that Chinese students develop from their study abroad experience that are key to career success and social mobility in the PRC.

I focus on the sequential development of two competencies outlined by CCT to distinguish between strategy and tactic. I suggest that in the space between the development of the knowing-why and knowing-how competencies is when we can determine whether Chinese international students are being strategic or tactical in pursuing IHE and developing their career trajectories. Strategy is linked to the pre-developed knowing-why competency, which then leads to students' purposeful pursuit of specific skills in the knowing-how competency. In contrast, tactic is the result of lacking clear goals for pursuing IHE by the time of going abroad; however, the knowing-how competency, developed as international students encounter unforeseen challenges and opportunities, could shape their education and career aspirations, which leads to a change in the knowing-why competency. While strategic development of the knowing-how competency is more directly associated with the rationalistic and institutional dispositions, tactical development of the knowing-why competency suggests opportunistic and impromptu dispositions.

The opportunistic and impromptu dispositions can be observed from the everyday life experiences of Chinese international students. We must not forget that studying abroad consists of not just academic and cultural learning, but also everyday learning from living independently and being flexible and adaptable in foreign environments (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Tharenous, 2015). These everyday competency developments, which are no less potent than academic work and professional training, constantly urge international students to step out of their comfort zones, and they have implications for students taking initiatives and trying to improve their social class status (Hao, Wen & Welch, 2016). Applying Bourdieu's disposition and socialization theorization to this everyday-learning context, Chinese international students

experience a socialization transition when they travel from their home country to their destination country. The different socialization environment in the foreign country will exert influence over individual disposition, which can be observed from the disposition changes by Chinese international students.

More recent studies indicate that studying abroad is a self-actualization process where tremendous and surprising changes take place to students' mentality, outlook, critical thinking, and sense of initiative (Hao, Wen, & Welch 2016; Sablina, Soong, & Pechurina, 2018; Wu, 2014). Knowing-why in particular encompasses the positive transformations that some students undergo as the result of overcoming adversities in foreign environments. These contingent transformations are highly individual and contextual as they are coproduced by factors from both external environments and students' internal interpretations and responses. As a result, individuals are stimulated by their IHE experiences to various extents, with some students potentially developing new dispositions that diverge from their previous conceptions about IHE.

The competencies Chinese international students develop abroad may not bring immediate returns in the form of career development when they graduate; however, these competencies have been merged into students' ways of learning, thinking, and doing during their many years of living overseas, and will continue to shape returnees' perspectives and decision-making throughout their post-graduation lives (Tharenous, 2015). This adaptive and transformative disposition related to the knowing-why competency development resonates with de Certeau's notion of tactic, where strategic planning is absent, but students are on the lookout constantly for opportunities and challenges. This also resonates with the less

rationalistic dispositions that are increasingly observed within the IHE narratives by Chinese international students (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Sablina, Soong, & Pechurina, 2018).

In summary, when families of different backgrounds reach the same decision to send their children to study abroad, IHE is pursued for different reasons and has been debated in the literature for its socially reproductive and transformative impacts in the PRC. Dissecting the two main sides of the intellectual debate reveals the significance of parental intervention and changing employment prospects for Chinese international students. My literature review has revealed four areas that need future research attention: 1) the geographical dimensions of state influence and social stratification, 2) the complexity of student voices, 3) education and career-shaping processes during studies and abroad, and 4) the exploratory nature of pursuing IHE, as opposed to having pre-determined objectives and engaging in extensive planning.

These identified research gaps have helped my selection of theoretical frameworks. My interest in exploring the dynamics between structural influence and individual capacity has led me to seek Bourdieu's rationalistic teachings on dispositions and socialization. Given the pervasive and powerful influence of the PRC state in mediating IHE and the country's still-underway establishment of social stratification, the overarching effects from the broader structures within the PRC must be noted. Moreover, while the situated aspect helps me examine individual students' voices, the dialogical aspect helps me examine the career-shaping processes taking place during their studies and their shared collective opinions. Focusing on these two aspects reveals student dispositions during their IHE migration, which contributes to the Bourdieusian theorization of disposition to influence and to be influenced by socialization. I extend my rationalistic interpretation of IHE migration using the Bourdieusian theorization by

incorporating de Certeau's delineation between strategy and tactic to make sense of IHE experiences that involve strategic planning and pre-determined objectives, as well as those that do not. I then seek to use CCT as my theoretical foundation to help me identify the strategic and tactical elements for my empirical investigation.

CHAPTER THREE — METHODOLOGY

This research is inspired by my own study abroad experience as a Chinese international student and my everyday interactions with other Chinese international students. The past six years of my international higher education (IHE) experience have provided me with ample opportunities to reflect on one important question: What does my IHE experience mean to me and my family? Moreover, I am intrigued by the connections to the bigger picture, including the meaning(s) of the expanding population of Chinese international students from the People's Republic of China (PRC). *My interactions and shared positionality with other Chinese international students have helped me see different conceptions of the value of IHE, and how IHE experiences are interconnected to factors such as family and societal institutions in shaping individual trajectories.* My IHE experience has inspired the methodological design for this research, which explores the diversity, fluidity, intersubjectivity, and complexity of international student narratives.

I start by sharing my own study abroad narrative to highlight how my IHE experience has extensively influenced the development of this research. More specifically, I explain how this experience has altered my understanding of IHE and social stratification in the PRC, as well as how I want to pursue this research. I then present a methodological framework grounded in post-positivism and social constructivism in order to explore the diversity and malleability of student narratives from situated and dialogical perspectives. This framework, along with my positionality (being both the researcher and the researched), induced the use of semi-structured interviews because it allows for an openness, diversity, and fluidity to the insights I can gain from speaking with Chinese international students. In the last section, I demonstrate

why Toronto, Canada, is an excellent geographical site for researching Chinese international students and for investigating the situated and dialogical aspects of this research by recruiting and interviewing Chinese students from the two largest universities in Toronto.

From Where I Was to Where I Am Going

Many researchers find it valuable to acknowledge the influence of one's positionality in their research settings (Caretta, 2015; England, 1994; Mason-Bish, 2018; Mottern, 2013; Rose, 1997). I see the value of unpacking my identity and positionality as well as the value of disclosing my personal and subjective involvements for a more transparent manner of knowledge production (Bettez, 2015; Darawsheh, 2014). My experience as an international student dates back to 2012, after I completed high school. Six years of studying abroad in Canada has provided me with numerous insights and opportunities to think about the meanings of studying abroad for me, my family members, and society. I come from a middle-class Chinese family. My parents, who only have an elementary school education, have always placed high importance on my education and that of my sister. I am appreciative of the promising path they paved for me to study abroad, especially as it is on that remains inaccessible to many other Chinese students. Studying in Canada was a decision made for me by my parents, though I was easily persuaded because I had already felt negatively impacted by China's domestic education system. IHE became an alternative for me since my parents knew that I would not be able to gain admission to any top-tier university in the PRC. Although other students in my high school who were also preparing for IHE were not the 'brightest' in terms of academic performance, I saw us as the lucky ones who had the chance to study abroad; I felt privileged even before I started my

studies in Canada. My learning style diverged from that of a regular high school student in the PRC during my preparation for studying abroad. For example, I left my high school during my last semester to focus on English-language training. My mother hired several native English speakers as personal tutors for me to practice my oral language skills. At that time, I realized that people around me started to see me through an 'international lens,' knowing that I would soon study abroad, see a more developed part of the world, and gain perspectives that were different than those of the students remaining in my home country.

High school was the time when I started to experience and realize the stratified nature of IHE system, specifically its financial exclusivity. Studying abroad was a 'higher-up' lifestyle that I used to dream of through television but never imagined experiencing for myself, largely because I did not excel academically. However, during this period in my life, studying abroad was already being marketed by the booming agency businesses as a brilliant investment and a shortcut to a prominent career in the PRC.[4] The enticing images of foreign school life and successful overseas returnees pervaded local communities in China. These images caught the attention of my parents, who eventually turned their daring idea of sending me abroad into my reality. Although at the time, I did not realize the financial implications of my education, I am now aware that my preparation for studying abroad was expensive. The numerous steps involved in my IHE application—a standardized test for the International English Language Testing System (commonly known as the IELTS), language lessons to prepare for the test, professional assistance from an IHE agency, and a study visa—would exclude those students

[4] Study abroad agents or education agents play an important role in many Chinese international students' applications to Western institutions. According to Hagedorn and Zhang (2011), agents provide comprehensive services, from recommending designated countries and institutions, preparing school application materials, initiating contact with the targeted institutions, and processing visas and other immigration documents required for application.

whose families could not afford these things. Regardless of my academic achievements to date, I acknowledge that my IHE opportunity and my aspirations for a career as an academic researcher would not have been possible without my parents' generous financial support. They played a critical role, notably by providing financial resources, in making my IHE experience possible. They initiated the idea of studying abroad, coordinated with the education agent to complete all of the applications, and supported me throughout my undergraduate study in Canada. Many of my high school classmates and peers at the end of my high school time would have been denied this opportunity due to their families' limited resources. As such, my personal IHE narrative has offered me a greater understanding of the exclusive and stratified aspect of IHE.

During my time studying abroad in Canada, I have met Chinese students who are determined to expand their family businesses back in the PRC by learning Western and international business operations. I have taken classes with individuals who study abroad out of a genuine interest in their subjects and their fondness for Western societies. I have also known Chinese students studying in Canada to help their families fulfill the occupancy requirement for permanent residency and citizenship while the parents remain in the PRC for employment reasons. My everyday interactions with students from diverse backgrounds have encouraged me to use this research opportunity to systematically represent their individual situations, identify influential factors, and make sense of their interconnectedness in constructing Chinese students' IHE narratives.

Although I never explicitly discussed with my parents their long-term goal for sending me abroad, including whether it had any connection to maintaining or improving our family's

existing social status, I foresee such a connection here, based on their expectations for my educational outcomes. Occasionally, my parents would joke that I am their best "investment" in life because, as they have told me many times, my achievements in my studies abroad make all their efforts worthwhile. I consider their expectations as benevolent, as many Chinese parents would hope the same for their children. However, these expectations have also served as a constant unspoken reminder that my IHE opportunity means not just educating myself, but is also a family obligation. The pressure that comes from this obligation stems from knowing the significant family savings that my parents have invested in my education and the other family commitments that might have been suspended in order to prioritize it. This pressure is amplified by the memories of our past financial hardships, which have shaped my understanding of the PRC's stratified social system.

During my middle-school education, my parents established their current business, which tremendously improved our living conditions. Before then, we were very much financially constrained—we lived in community housing and all of us shared one bed. Having lived through this family transition—shifting from lower-class to middle-class—social mobility is not just a concept for me; rather I know its importance given that my education comes from this experience. Despite my parents' limited formal schooling, they see my education as essential and constantly remind me of its value. Some of their advice is humourous but packed with meaning that I still contemplate today. One example I translate into English is the following phrase: "What an uneducated man says is nothing but a fart, but what an educated man says is always sweet, even his farts." To me, there is no doubt that my parents see a direct link between education and upward social mobility. My parents' economic transition, their

education-first view, and my upbringing have played an important role in shaping my understanding of the social system in the PRC, the value of my IHE, and the stratified nature of IHE. These personal experiences have developed my academic interest in exploring the experiences of Chinese international students.

Situating the Methodological Approach

My own IHE experience has helped me realize the vital influence my parents had on my education and how I have developed my career trajectory around my family situation. Additionally, I have witnessed how my parents have improved our social class status, and I have learned about the pivotal role of my education in maintaining their current status. These observations have inspired my interest in exploring how other Chinese international students think about their IHE experiences in relation to their family situations, and to what extent their perceptions reflect the existing social systems in the PRC. I pursue an intersubjective way of research, for I want to discern the individual subjectivity and the share realities within student narratives (Duranti, 2010). In addition to highlighting the situated aspects of individual students, their families, and institutions involved (i.e., universities, policies) that are the building blocks for constructing their unique IHE experiences, I also focus on how these individual aspects interact or configure student experiences, and to what extent student perceptions about IHE are shaped by others and their surrounding environments. In order to achieve this, I centre the methodological design of this research between the approaches of post-positivism and social constructivism, more specifically how they emphasize the importance of situatedness and dialogism in knowledge production. From a situated angle, I explore specific factors that

contribute to the construction of students' diverse individual narratives. From a dialogical knowledge angle, I probe into the interconnectedness between students, other social agents, and the institutions.

My take-away from post-positivism is its view of knowledge as an aspiration to explore the diverse situations and sources for understanding human experiences (Caretta, 2015; Cruickshank, 2012; Fox, 2008). A post-positivist viewpoint in discovering situated knowledges allows me to explore the contextuality, complexity, partiality, and contingency within student narratives that reflect the specific individual, family, and social situations in which they dwell (Haraway, 1988). My personal experience as a Chinese international student and the divergence between my experience and that of other Chinese students surrounding me embodies this situated aspect of IHE experiences. Despite the fact that we—Chinese international students—reach the same decision on studying abroad, we possess contrasting personal aspirations, are brought up by families of diverse backgrounds, and socialize within our unique social contexts. As a result, we see and think about our IHE experiences differently. Focusing on this situated angle enables me to explore individual contextuality, which then sheds light on the diversity of students' and their families' dispositions. I can then situate my analyses of dispositions within my theoretical frameworks by distinguishing among the diverse agency responses to habitus (Bourdieu) and by delineating between strategies and tactics (de Certeau). Similar dispositions can then be understood through intersubjectivity and social constructivism.

This task will be difficult not only because of the diversity of student narratives, but also because of the malleability of these narratives. Simply put, narratives are not isolated and static.

The investigation is not thorough without unravelling the interconnectedness and fluidity between the core aspects—individual, familial, institutional, and state—in order to interpret how they shape students and are being shaped in return. I am deeply interested in exploring such a dynamism, and therefore my investigation requires an understanding of student narratives from a dialogical angle. From a social constructivist perspective, knowledge is viewed as a social co-construction between agents that share similar interests and assumptions (Adams, 2006; Kim, 2001). These agencies include individual students, their families, and the institutions with which they interact. The dialogic approach to knowledge accentuates this social constructivist view, assuming that parties from comparable backgrounds and with similar interests negotiate converging understandings about a particular human experience (Creswell, 2007; Mojtahed et al., 2014).

The dialogical aspect has been noted for its theoretical significance. For de Certeau's theory on *the Practice of Everyday Life*, this means that collective strategies are adapted by certain groups in order to reach their institutional objectives; similarly, tactics are negotiated when agencies have no pre-determined objectives but adapt to opportunities and challenges as they arise (de Certeau, 1984). This dialogical aspect also aligns with Bourdieu's theorization of education as a socialization site, where agents socially negotiate education values to navigate society (Bourdieu, 1973). Consequently, the situated aspect helps me identify the various parties that are involved in constructing student narratives, while the dialogical aspect sheds light on any dynamism and malleability within student narratives.

Choosing an Instrument

Since I pursue an intersubjective approach to research—focusing on the situated and dialogical aspects of IHE experiences—I am interested in exploring student perceptions; thus, a qualitative research instrument with the flexibility to adapt as students reveal their narratives is key. This means that quality control, specifically how the researcher facilitates and influences the process of information gathering, needs to be addressed and optimized. My positionality as both a Chinese international student and a researcher enhance such quality control and is critical to my selection of semi-structured interviews as the research instrument for this project. England (1994) points out that researchers directly impact the fieldwork experience between themselves and the researched. Not only did my Chinese international student identity facilitate the information-gathering process, but it has also helped me mitigate the limitations of using semi-structured interviews as a research instrument. This shared identity with my interviewees—being a Chinese international student—enhances my interactions with other Chinese international students during the interviews, expanding the width, deepening the depth, and improving the overall authenticity of the information that I have gathered. For example, being a Chinese international student has helped me locate and relate shared experiences and perspectives with other Chinese students, allowing me to traverse between researcher and participant positionalities. This advantage permits interactions with my interviewees through engagement in both scholarly and quotidian conversations.

This shared student identity has also eliminated some of the institutional barriers that can exist between the researcher and participants, allowing me to put the interviewees at ease, gain their trust, establish a rapport, and consequently, transform the interview experience into

an approachable conversation between two students (me and the interviewee). Most of my interviewees were relaxed but highly engaged during the interview sessions. This is essential to the nature of this research and to the selection of semi-structured interview, as I have realized from my interview experiences that most interviewees openly discussed their family situations and future plans, including the disclosure of very personal information, the sharing of which demands great trust. For example, Gwen[5] was comfortable telling me that her parents are working in Alberta, living in a precarious economic situation, in order to support her IHE expenses in Canada. Lee, Louis, Liz, and Shirley shared with me the extensive and powerful employment networks that their parents possess in the PRC, ones that can guarantee these students well-paid positions regardless of their education outcomes. Although some of the shared information is sensitive—for instance families' "unfair" arrangements are noted and analyzed for research purposes—interviewees' openness is vital to understanding the authentic IHE experiences of Chinese international students. I believe that my appearance as a Chinese student and my identity as a fellow student encouraged their willingness to engage in such interview conversations.

Moreover, when conducting interviews with multilingual speakers, the quality of an interview cannot be detached from the choice of language in which the interview is conducted. A study by Cortazzi et al., (2011) reveals the divergence in interview results depending on the choice of interview language between Chinese and English for the same question content. Considering that my interview participants' first language is Mandarin (a standard variety of Chinese and the official language of the PRC), I recruited them in both Mandarin and English,

[5] All names used to refer to interviewees are pseudonyms.

and I offered students the option to participate in the interview in either language. In the end, all students chose to speak Mandarin. While translation between Mandarin and English posed challenges during my analyses of the interview transcripts, communication in Mandarin was smooth for all interviewees. In this sense, the advantages of speaking the same first language as my participants during the interviews significantly outweighed the translational challenges that I confronted.

Conducting the interviews in Mandarin helped me eliminate potential communication barriers, for instance eliciting culturally specific vocabulary that is absent in English.[6] It also helped improve the sessions' quality, as all my interviewees appeared to be comfortable and most were capable of expressing complex thoughts in their first language. This linguistic advantage also helped me with recruitment. As I disseminated my informed consent and interview guide in both English and Mandarin, some of my interviewees told me that they became intrigued when seeing a Chinese-named student researcher recruiting and conducting research on the experience of Chinese international students. This curiosity is mixed with positive and negative ramifications. While I did receive some negative feedback from two interviewees who told me that a researcher with a Chinese name bears less academic legitimacy in their minds, other interviewees explained that it is rare for them to see a Chinese student figure conducting university-level academic research. Despite the mixed opinions, linguistic advantage and my Chinese name indeed piqued student curiosity, which served a useful purpose and helped me recruit my interviewees.

[6] Some examples include "wild chicken," "sea turtles," "seaweed," and "watery," all of which are integral components to understanding Chinese students' IHE experiences. These terms will be highlighted in the empirical chapter and analyzed in the analytical chapter.

Besides my dual positionality and linguistic advantage, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews facilitated the exploration of situated and dialogical knowledges within student narratives. This flexibility comes from the possibility for spontaneously adapting questions based on my anchored research themes and the information provided by interviewees. The structured component of this method begins in the form of an interview guide constructed on the existing literature knowledge and what I, as a researcher, wanted to discover through this project (Creswell, 2017; Kallio et al., 2016). My interview guide helped me anchor the interview conversations in four specific aspects indicated in my research objective. I formulated eight guiding questions to probe student perceptions on: 1) their experiences of studying abroad, 2) their family situation, 3) their prospects in the PRC labour market, and 4) the influence of the previous three aspects in shaping students' education aspirations and future career planning (see APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE).

While anchoring these specific themes, the openness of this interview guide also allowed me to tailor the sessions toward students in order to explore their individual scenarios (Jamshed, 2014; Mclntosh & Morse, 2015; Mojtahed et al., 2014). Not only is the interview guide designed to prioritize the gathering of situated individual information about students and their families, but most of these questions are interconnected to reveal the dialogical construction of IHE experiences between students, their family members, and other factors. For instance, I asked how family situation (including financial strength and family networks) would influence students' IHE experience and career trajectories. Identifying the connections between the key aspects mentioned by my interviewees was one of the major goals of using the interview guide. Each question contains several sub-questions serving as suggestions and cues

to help adapt the conversations as they evolve. This flexibility maximizes the potential for collecting diverse perspectives, which helped broaden the scope of my investigation, and I could probe further according to what was provided by the interviewees to deepen the interview content (Mojtahed et al., 2014).

The openness and flexibility of the interview format rewarded me with a wide spectrum of student narratives, which demonstrate their unique situations and the various extents of their interconnectedness to familial and other factors. For example, Gwen decided to start the interview from question number four, which asks about the student's family situation. For her, "my family situation is the starting point to understanding my story." Indeed, her family members' extensive financial sacrifices and her self-reported peasant family background are key to understanding her unique IHE experience. Letting Gwen assume the lead and adapt the interview session to her personal situation helped reveal a more organic representation of her experience.

Similarly, my session with Liz started with her demonstration of family wealth, which led to my identifying a key term, "tastes," around which I oriented many of my subsequent questions regarding her development of such "tastes." Her "tastes" echo what I have read about Bourdieu's teachings on dispositions, which helped me bridge the theoretical with the empirical. The two narratives by Gwen and Liz are worth mentioning because of the stark contrast in their IHE experiences and family situations; as a result, I adapted the remaining interview questions during these two interviews towards their families' influence on the two students' IHE experiences. In contrast, I reduced the emphasis on family influence during interviews with students like Sara and Sue, who both reported their individual decision-making

and independent financial status with almost no family influence. The aforementioned individual cases are examples where I relied on the flexibility of the semi-structured interview to tailor each interview session based on personal situations in order to obtain more organic insights from my interviewees. Nonetheless, I used the same interview guide for all interviewees to ensure a consistent research process.

Semi-structured interviews also stimulated reciprocal interactions between me and the interview participants, fostering a manner of knowledge co-production between the researcher and the researched, which eventually sheds light on new knowledge frontiers (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). This prevents a monopoly of the researcher's interpretive capabilities by reversing the typical accountability relationships that occur during interviews, where researchers probe and informants respond, lacking the dynamic of meaningful negotiation during interview operationalization (Mojtahed et al., 2014). The dynamic conversation between my interviewees and me led to co-producing new perspectives that challenged the knowledge I have gained through my engagement with the literature. This is particularly important to my research context, where I focus on discovering the situated aspects, which I unravel in order to better understand how they interact with each other.

Despite the literature that I have read, specifically the theorizations and arguments that I outline in the literature review chapter, I realized and began to appreciate the "messiness" within my empirical findings, which I see as the fruition of knowledge production. By "messiness" I mean the complexity of student narratives, which suggests that no one theoretical framework can be applied to explain all individual situations. For example, I have learned that despite the fact that family situation is intertwined variously with students' IHE

experiences, family members tend not to burden students with family obligations. Liz and Shirley, two students from elite families, stated that they are studying abroad only for their personal development, with no perceived financial contribution to their families post-graduation. Similarly, Gwen and Sue also reported that studying abroad is part of their personal pursuit, and showed little concern for family obligations. The shared sense of IHE freedom among these four students surprised me, considering their contrasting financial situations. Although some aspects of these four individuals indicated the various tendencies to enhance or transform their family status, as the literature suggests, the families of all four students encouraged them to pursue their personal interests. Consequently, my understanding of the complexity within Chinese international students' IHE narratives improves as I meet with more interviewees.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviews also helped me mitigate the challenge in bridging the gap between the theoretical and the empirical during the interview sessions. For my research goal of pursuing the situated and dialogical aspects, I investigated how IHE is connected to social reproduction, social mobility, and social stratification. However, these concepts and academic terms may not be thought of in relation to the daily experiences by most Chinese international students. Therefore, it would be extremely difficult or impossible for them to comment on these terms directly. During my interview design and the actual interviews, I avoided the use of academic jargon and the wording of questions that would be considered detached from the students' day-to-day experiences. For example, the question—Do you consider studying abroad as a family strategy to consolidate or improve your family's

current social stature in the PRC?—would be considered far-fetched to many Chinese international students, and therefore inappropriate to ask bluntly during the interviews.

However, during my conversations with my interviewees, I was able to learn relevant aspects that allowed me to respond to these questions by referring back to the stories that the student shared. My questions helped them reconsider certain incidents in their past, which helped them conceptualize their experiences in relation to my research concepts (i.e., social stratification and social reproduction). For example, Amanda commented the end of the interview:

> Today's interview experience makes me feel . . . I had those ideas in my head like always, but I wouldn't connect them to my family and with society. But now that you have asked me, I think these connections are always there.

Amanda's experiences, like the experiences of many of the other interviewees, align with my investigation on how PRC society is structured, validating my research questions. I was strategic in letting students ease into the interviews with more approachable questions before gradually getting to the concepts within my research questions and conceptual framework.

I strategized my interview sessions to transform some academic jargon and concepts into more accessible ideas, and to integrate them into my interviews. In doing so, I deployed two strategies during all interview sessions. First, I asked questions based on the aforementioned four focal areas in my interview guide. Since I explicitly asked students about the connections between their IHE and their family situations, I was able to assess whether students' IHE experiences and their families' social status are connected to my research concepts. Second, I identified cues from the interviews and adapted my subsequent questions based on what was already mentioned in order to probe the information linked more closely to

social reproduction and social mobility. Separating the two steps helped me overcome the knowledge specificity required to understand my research concepts, which may confound Chinese international students or people outside of social sciences research in general.

At the beginning of the interviews, participants were asked about basic identity markers, such as gender, age, university affiliation, year of study, level of study, and program of study, for interview and analysis purposes. During the interviews, these identity markers served as clues for me to adapt the interview conversations by tailoring questions towards each student's scenario. During the analyses, these identity markers helped me unpack individual narratives. As Chao et al., (2017) as well as Waters and Leung (2017) indicate, decisions about programs of study have been closely linked to career planning. Subjects related to technology, economics, and business management are among the top choices for Chinese international students because of the booming e-commerce industry in the PRC, which demands professionals from such fields (Centre for China and Globalization, 2018). Similarly, the levels of study also reflect specific student needs and ambitions in terms of continuous personal development and career opportunities. Given the increasing prevalence of undergraduate foreign credentials in the PRC labour market, some students may seek credentials at the graduate level due to the relative rarity of these credentials. These identity markers provide insights into students' rationales for their current studies and their future plans. By understanding individual dispositions, I grasped the similarities and differences within Chinese international students' IHE socialization experiences.

Finding Chinese International Students in Toronto

According to Waters (2006), geographers have contributed most to making the connection between IHE and social stratification by examining education mobility and the associated new geographies of cultural capital. Given that this research intends to explore the aforementioned connection by examining how the action of pursuing higher education in a Western country transnationally shapes the PRC's social stratification, I recruited and interviewed Chinese international students in Toronto, Canada.[7] Canada has the reputation as one of the leading studying abroad destinations, attracting student migrants from around the world. According to the results of the 2018 International Student Survey by the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE), a nation-wide survey that is meant to shed light on the 494,525 international students who are studying in Canada during the year of the survey, the country has experienced significant growth—about 154 per cent—in its international student population between 2010 and 2018 (CBIE, 2018).[8] Their survey results also show that students are very content with their education experiences and outcomes—93 percent are satisfied or very satisfied, 96 percent would recommend Canada as a study destination, and 87 percent think that their Canadian education will be highly beneficial in preparing them for employment. The top three reasons that international students choose Canada as their study abroad destination are: 1) the

[7] Three criteria were used during participant recruitment for the semi-structured interviews: 1) Chinese by nationality, 2) living in the Greater Toronto Area, and 3) currently attending either the University of Toronto or York University, of any gender or program or level of study. All criteria coincided with the participating criteria for an online survey (in Qualtrics) by faculty researcher Dr. Lucia Lo from the Department of Geography at York University. Dr. Lo agreed and let me recruit interview participants for my thesis research using an anonymized email contact list from the survey participants who previously indicated their interest in being contacted for future research. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of my informants.

[8] CBIE is a Canadian non-governmental membership organization dedicated exclusively to international education. All figures reported in this paragraph are from the analysis of the 2018 International student survey provided as public information on the CBIE website.

reputation of the Canadian education system, 2) general perceptions of Canadian society as being tolerant and non-discriminatory, and 3) Canada's reputation as a safe country.

Toronto is Canada's largest metropolitan area and home to many renowned academic institutions. Chinese international students comprise the largest international student population by nationality in Canada (28 percent) and worldwide (CBIE, 2018; CCG Annual Report, 2018). From my own perspective as a Chinese international student, Toronto is an attractive place for IHE. Studying in a large metropolitan area has always been on the top of my wish list for studying abroad. My personal preference and interactions with other Chinese international students contributed to my final decision to pursue my master's degree in Toronto. As my two years of education and living experiences in Toronto have shown, the city is indeed a popular destination for many Chinese international students like me, because of its reputation, its metropolitan experience, its high concentration of ethnic Chinese communities, and its being home to many highly-ranked institutions. From a researcher's perspective, the geographical advantage of Toronto lies in maximizing my goal of interacting with Chinese international students.

Two universities, the University of Toronto (UT) and York University (YU), located in the Greater Toronto Area, are two popular destinations for Chinese international students. During the 2018 academic year, UT reported enrollment of 11,544 international students who are Chinese by citizenship (University of Toronto, 2018b). In the same year, YU reported a total number of 4,434 Chinese international students registered as active undergraduate and graduate students (York University, 2018c; 2018d). In order to maximize my chance to connect with this cohort, I recruited at the institutions' main (and largest) campuses—the UT St. George

campus in downtown Toronto and the YU Keele campus in north Toronto. Both have the highest concentration of international students from all levels and programs of study in Toronto (University of Toronto, 2018c; Dwyer, 2017; York University, 2018b).

UT ranks 21st globally and accommodates the largest international student population for higher education in Canada (Times Higher Education World University Ranking, 2019a). YU ranks between 351st to 400th globally and has the third-largest international student enrollment in the country (Times Higher Education World University Ranking, 2019b). The two universities are selected not only because they are two leading universities in Toronto and popular destinations for Chinese international students, but also because of their potential in allowing me to compare the situated and dialogical aspects within student experiences. I was curious about how a university's global ranking affects decision-making, current IHE experiences, and anticipated career trajectories of Chinese students studying at UT and the YU. Furthermore, I wanted to discover to what extent their selection of university is intertwined with parental opinions and how other parties such as educational agencies and the PRC state are involved. University rankings have been a popular discussion topic in the literature on international students, with many scholars noting that Western credentials from a high-ranking university have a direct and positive impact on one's career prospects in many Asian countries (Chen, 2007; Waters, 2008). Research has shown that credentials from a well-known university outweigh everything else, even knowledge itself, to many international applicants (Waters & Leung, 2017). For Chinese families, global rankings remain a key criterion in university selection (CCG Annual Report, 2018).

Most of my interviewees were very conscious of how their Canadian university's global ranking and its public reputation in the PRC will impact their future employability at home. The interviewees from YU commented specifically that their credentials from YU will not be as competitive as those from UT. Interestingly, UT is often a comparison brought up by the YU interviewees, but not vice versa. The UT students demonstrate confidence in their credentials. Tony comments: "This is the UT. The fact you can get in means you're at least not bad." This suggests a contrast in the educational socialization experiences within Bourdieu's conceptual framework, fostering an institutional hierarchy that is used to distinguish among Chinese international students.

Similarly, Shirley, a master's student, chose UT simply for its prestige, despite receiving better financial offers from other Canadian universities and identifying a more appropriate research supervisor elsewhere. The career advantages stemming from a UT education were mentioned by two students. As a result of Chinese employers' bias toward prestigious Western universities, both Amanda and Eric revealed that they experienced career privilege as students from UT during their internships in the PRC and Hong Kong, respectively. Amanda says she received her internship offer after the first-round interview, and learned later that many applicants who landed the same internship position as her, but are domestic graduates or from less prestigious foreign universities, went through a much more rigorous and prolonged sifting procedure. Similarly, Eric believes that his employer trusted him more than other interns: "Being a UT student adds extra intellectual credit, even before I started doing anything."

The tuition gap between the two universities can also reveal valuable information about how students from different family situations select universities, specifically how family wealth

and parent opinions are involved. UT's international tuition fees range from C$40,000 to C$50,000 annually, depending on the program and level of study (University of Toronto, 2018a). In contrast, YU charges approximately half that amount (York University, 2018a). Although many Chinese students desire to attend prestigious institutions, putting aside academic achievements, the attendance rate at prestigious universities like UT could be restricted by financial constraints. However, IHE experience and its associated benefits, including foreign language skills, credentials, and institutional training, are still accessible by attending an institution that requires a lower financial commitment, like YU. In fact, tuition cost has been debated as a factor for Chinese international students' selection of foreign universities. Altbach and Knight (2007) suggest that despite the growth in the international student population, the significant tuition fees at institutions like the UT are not for all international student families. In contrast, the CCG Annual Report (2018) indicates that tuition cost is not a primary concern for Chinese international students and their parents when it comes to university selection.

My interviewees expressed various opinions regarding the tuition fees from UT and YU. While only one student, Gwen, reports her YU expenses as a significant financial commitment that impacted her family's situation, nearly all of the other interviewees consider their IHE costs as a side investment from their parents, with different experiences of financial pressure. For current UT students like Eric, Louis, and Tony, their parents encouraged them to choose UT for its prestige, ignoring the higher costs. Variation in attendance at elite universities attendance due to financial constraints and the perceived implications that arose in the individual narratives of YU and UT students are particularly informative when trying to understand education decision-making in relation to family situation. Unpacking students' individual study

abroad narratives in relation to family rationales for university selection reveals important information regarding social stratification in the PRC.

Regardless of the two factors cited above—university rankings and tuition fees—one cannot assume that students from higher-income families will necessarily end up in higher-ranking universities. There are also academic and standardized test requirements for university admission. Additionally, students' subject interests, structure of their program study, and other factors are also at play. Some students could come from less wealthy families but gain admission to a prestigious university through academic achievements and scholarships. Similarly, some students could make the decision based on program ranking instead of university ranking. This reflects the diversity and situated aspects of student narratives before and during their study abroad. This also reflects the dialogical manner of decision-making for IHE that involves the negotiation between multiple factors ranging from personal interest, parental intervention, and institutional involvement to perceived employment prospect. This research sheds light on the diversity and complexity of IHE decision-making and student experiences using information collected through semi-structured interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR — EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Examining individual Chinese international students' narratives about their international higher education (IHE) experiences reveals the diversity of their study abroad aspirations, future goals, and expected obligations to their families. The research also reveals that their decision-making during their IHE is not determined only by them and their parents. Reflecting the multifaceted nature of personal and familial situations, my interviewees also gave accounts of many influential external factors. The dynamism of factors at and between different levels – personal, familial and institutional – observed within my interview narratives resonate with Pierre Bourdieu's work on the dispositions of different social classes and their distinctive socialization experiences. I demonstrate through students' narratives the diverse ways of approaching IHE and how these different approaches comprise the distinctive dispositions, reflecting a stratified landscape of IHE participation.

I delve into the diversity of these individual narratives. *The ways that Chinese international students in Toronto and their parents are approaching IHE are complex, even when these students are engaging in the same activity of studying abroad*. While some students decide to conform to the structural "rules" set by the PRC institutions in order to turn their IHE experience into institutional advantages, others defy those "rules" by focusing on fulfilling their own purposes. Similarly, while some students have opinions that converge with those of their parents, and to various extent follow the paths designed by their parents, others diverge from their parents' opinions and wishes and assume a more autonomous and proactive role in negotiating their own education paths. Moreover, family situation, particularly financial strength, is a powerful factor shaping students' current IHE experiences and future planning. In

this chapter, I will first offer a profile of my interviewees before I turn to specific individual stories that were gathered during my research. While I broadly divide these stories into elite and non-elite, I also coalesce narratives that share similarities, regardless of their status as elite/non-elite.

Field Site Summary

For this study, which was conducted between September and December 2018, I interviewed 19 Chinese international students located in Toronto who were studying at York University (YU) or the University of Toronto (UT). Although this sample is too small to generalize the findings, a closer look at their profile will help put their stories into perspective. Table 1 contains their identity markers and features that I collected from the information that they provided while filling out the consent form for this study. I use fictitious names for all interviewees to preserve interviewee confidentiality. Please also note that areas marked "n/a" in the table indicate that students did not provide such information.

I recruited more Chinese international students studying at YU (n=12) than at UT (n=7). I recruited all of my interviewees using contact information from surveys conducted by a faculty researcher as part of her ongoing research project.[9] The YU survey had a higher response rate, and provided me with a larger pool for interviewee recruitment. In contrast, we experienced difficulties with the UT survey, which impacted the recruitment for my study. I used the limited

[9] Dr. Lucia Lo from the Department of Geography at York University was conducting her Intellectual Migration Research project during the period of my thesis research. Given our similar academic interests and the same focus on Chinese international students, I worked as a Research Assistant for the project. The Office of Research Ethics at YU reviewed and approved my use of the contact information from Dr. Lo's survey data for my recruitment.

information collected with the UT survey to recruit for my study, which explains the lower response rate of UT students than YU students.

Table 1. Identity Markers of Interviewees

Fictitious Name	University Affiliation	Gender	Age	Year of Study	Level of Study	Program of Study
Amanda	UT	Woman	21	4th	Undergraduate	Finance
Amy	YU	Woman	n/a	4th	Undergraduate	Economics
Eric	UT	Man	23	1st	Graduate	Finance
Gwen	YU	Woman	23	1st	Graduate	n/a
Howard	YU	Man	19	1st	Pathway	n/a
John	YU	Man	n/a	2nd	Undergraduate	Engineering
Katie	YU	Woman	24	1st	Graduate	Human Resource
Mary	YU	Woman	n/a	4th	Undergraduate	Economics
Lee	YU	Man	24	3rd	Undergraduate	Geography
Lisa	YU	Woman	24	2nd	Graduate	Chemistry
Liz	UT	Woman	19	2nd	Undergraduate	Accounting
Louis	UT	Man	20	1st	Undergraduate	Statistics
Sam	YU	Man	23	3rd	Undergraduate	Economics
Sara	UT	Woman	27	1st	Graduate	Cultural Studies
Shirley	UT	Woman	24	2nd	Graduate	History
Sue	YU	Woman	29	3rd	Graduate	Mathematics
Terri	YU	Woman	23	2nd	Graduate	Anthropology
Tom	YU	Man	n/a	4th	Undergraduate	Geography
Tony	UT	Man	n/a	2nd	Undergraduate	History

My participants varied in their levels of study, and they range from undergraduates to doctoral students, with 10 at the undergraduate level, eight at the graduate level, and one in a language pathway program which precedes one's undergraduate studies. Among the undergraduate students, several specialized in Economics and Finance-related fields, while graduate students were from more diverse programs and disciplines that included Anthropology, Cultural Studies and Chemistry.

In terms of program of study, my interviewees were from 10 different programs. Although the pathway student had not yet determined his major, he expressed an interest in the Business program at YU. Similarly, the student who did not reveal this information suggested during the interview that she planned to go into an Education program. The general observation here is that students who are pursuing an Arts, Humanities or Science degree, rather than a Business-related degree, have more specific interests or plans for their education. Graduate students in non-Business fields reported the most specific planning including how they want to deploy their field of knowledge. For example, some want to continue into an academic career and others pursue the subject for personal interest.[10] These students tend to be more determined and strategic in their IHE. They mentioned less involvement from their parents during their studies abroad. In contrast, undergraduate students in Business, Economics and Statistics are on a more exploratory trajectory, with many still formulating a clear objective from their IHE experiences.[11] Correspondingly, these students reported more extensive parental influence in various aspects of their IHE experiences.

It is also important to note that all of my interviewees are in their twenties. Most of them travelled abroad for a university education after high school in the PRC while a few did come at an earlier age. They all considered pursuing a university degree in Canada a better option than pursuing it in the PRC albeit for different reasons. Two students are notably older. Sara, at the age of 27, was a working professional before she decided to study abroad for no real professional or financial purpose. Sue, at the age of 29, is a doctoral student whose IHE experience is part of her doctoral studies in her home university back in the PRC, and she came

[10] See the narratives by Gwen, Lisa, Sara, Sue and Terri for example.
[11] See the narratives by John, Louis and Sam for example.

abroad to strengthen the competitiveness of her academic profile in view of a future academic career.

More women (n=11) than men (n=8) participated in this research. One general observation is that my female interviewees tended to orient their IHE experiences more towards career development than the male interviewees, with some demonstrating clear goals even at the beginning of their IHE experience.[12] In contrast, more men described a changing mindset as a result of various contextual factors during studying abroad. Some men reported developing entrepreneurial ideas that were not part of their decision-making process prior to leaving the PRC.[13] One might wonder to what extent gendered expectations intersect with planned outcomes for studying abroad. Students and their families have a clear understanding of gender-based obligations, which will necessarily impact their IHE experiences before, during and after their studying abroad. However, it is interesting to note the emancipating potential of studying abroad from these gendered expectations. For instance, some women in this research reported that they felt fewer family obligations related to studying abroad, and had more discretion for IHE-related decisions.[14] It is important to note here that the two students who self-identified as elite in this study are women, which begs the question of how gender, social status and other identity markers intersect and shape different decision-making strategies.[15]

More specifically, I focused on the narratives of 11 individuals as they provided me with more extensive and in-depth information as well as plenty of examples pertaining to their IHE experiences. This offered me more opportunities to connect their experiences to findings in the

[12] See the narratives by Lisa, Sue and Terri for example.
[13] See the narratives by John, Louis and Sam for example.
[14] See the narratives by Gwen, Lisa and Sara for example.
[15] See the narratives by Lisa (mentioned the different parenting style for her brother), and Liz (free-ranging education style for women).

existing literature. For example, the elite experiences that I captured from some interviews are already documented by Johanna Waters and Ailei Xie, which allowed me to highlight shared perspectives among elite students interviewed by me and others (Waters 2009; 2008; 2012; 2015; Xie et al., 2018a; 2018b). Similarly, since the majority of my interviewees self-identified as coming from "normal" families, which is interpreted as non-elite in this research, I focused on analyzing their narratives using the literature that highlights the diverse non-elite navigations of studying abroad (Kelly & Lusis, 2006; Kim, 2010; Sablinaa, Soong & Pechurina, 2018; Yang, 2018).

I prioritized the situatedness of those narratives that echoed my methodological pursuit inspired by post-positivism. I found these individual differences fascinating and I believe that they will become valuable references for researchers who are tackling similar topics. Furthermore, the dialogical conversations with these students, facilitated by my own positionality as a Chinese international student, helped me reveal substantive information about shared student experiences. For the eight individuals who shared less with me during the interviews, they provided information that resonated with what I collected from the other 11 interviews, particularly in how they were commonly affected by *gaokao*.

All individual opinions and stories in this research are represented in the form of individual experiences and shared realities, which aligns with my post-positivist and constructivist viewpoint. Starting from the non-elite individuals, I reveal the IHE experiences of four female students, Sue, Terri, Lisa, and Sara. They all anticipate establishing careers in academia or research fields, having received different sources of financial support to pay for their IHE expenses, and having decided to study abroad in response to a variety of different

incentives. Then, I focus on the story of Gwen, who claims that her past family situation and experiences are unique. I move on to the stories of four male students, Sam, Eric, Louis, and John, who have experienced significant changes during their time abroad, which have helped them develop unique future plans. Lastly, I present the narratives of two self-identified elite. These two individuals' unique pursuits differ from those of the other students, as do their conceptions about their IHE experiences and their overseas living experiences in general.

Navigating a Convergent Institutional Path from Divergent Backgrounds

Sue[16] and Terri[17] reveal that an overseas education experience is becoming an increasingly important hiring criterion for academic positions at post-secondary institutions in the PRC. These Chinese graduate students are in Canada on a scholars exchange program to accumulate valuable overseas education experience. Unlike other interviewees, their IHE is funded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC) as part of their degree studies at their respective PRC universities. In their separate interviews, they both pointed out that the scholarship is offered to help graduate students like them gain Western academic experience to improve their own research. In exchange, recipients agree to remain in the PRC for two additional years after graduation to contribute to the development of academia in the country. Sue and Terri believe that receiving support through the scholars exchange program is an extraordinary personal achievement as well as an opportunity for them to upgrade their academic credentials and to increase their employment competitiveness at home. Although they are pursuing the same

[16] Interview conducted on 1 October 2018 in Toronto.
[17] Interview conducted on 20 September 2018 in Toronto.

path for their IHE, they come from starkly contrasting family backgrounds, and they narrate differently about their understandings of the meaning of studying abroad.

Sue, a third-year doctoral candidate in Mathematics at East China Normal University, is spending her one-year scholarly exchange at YU. She portrays herself as coming from a very low-income peasant family in the PRC; however, her IHE experience does not incur any financial pressure on her family. She explained that her parents emotionally support her academic pursuits and never intervene, but simply do not have the financial strength to contribute to any of her IHE expenses. All of her education opportunities to date, including her IHE funding from the CSC, are possible due to her genuine interest and distinguished academic achievements in mathematics, around which she wants to build an academic career.

Sue's two main incentives for studying abroad are to increase her competitiveness for a future career in academia and to upgrade her research skills. She says: "If I have the study experience here [Canada], I can get a teaching position at a higher-ranking Chinese university and have a better platform to bring out the best of me." The desire to study overseas emerged during the second year of her doctoral studies, when she realized that many of her senior student colleagues were trained overseas. When Sue was pursuing her master's degree, she heard from her university's Dean that the recruitment quota for domestic PhD holders was substantially reduced, yielding space for more overseas-educated talent. Sue indicates that people in her field of mathematics regard Western universities as more influential and cutting-edge. This has led her to believe that her IHE experience in Canada will directly translate into the academic strength that will help her upgrade her future career prospects and increase her

scholarly recognition at home, which may help her secure a competitive position at a desirable institution.

Like Sue, Terri also wants to strengthen her employment prospects in her academic field by acquiring overseas academic experience. Terri is a master's student in Social Anthropology from the Graduate School of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, a renowned public research institution in Beijing. She also has CSC funding for a one-year period. She believes that this IHE opportunity will lay a solid foundation for her potential overseas doctoral studies and future recognition in the PRC. Terri has learned about the Chinese academic hiring regime and ranking from her father, who works as a professor at her home institution. She describes it as a foreign-centric hierarchy in which international PhD holders are ranked higher than domestic graduates. If all competitors for a position are overseas PhD returnees, the ranking is extended to whether competitors studied abroad for their master's degrees, and then for their bachelor's degrees. In other words, actual job performance may not be viewed as important as overseas credentials.

Despite coming from a much wealthier family background than Sue, Terri[18] refuses to capitalize on her family resources. Both of Terri's parents are university graduates—her mother is a Human Resources manager at a major Chinese corporation and her father is a government official with a German doctoral degree. Terri says that her father has always wanted her to excel in English and study abroad. He even tried to instill in Terri a more international mindset by exposing her to Western cultural practices from an early age. For example, he made her read the Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter series in English during her early school years. Although

[18] Interview conducted on 20 September 2018 in Toronto.

her parents can afford her IHE expenses, Terri wants to be financially independent. She thinks that financial reliance on her parents will result in greater parental control over her decisions, and she is determined to secure her own financial resources for her overseas studies:

> If I let them pay for this [costs of studying abroad], they will have more say in my future career and may control my life after school . . . Now that my study is paid for through the government scholarship [one-year scholar exchange funding from the CSC], I won't use any of their money. Even if they oppose my decision, I may still go abroad, for I have mobilized the money myself.

Despite her independence, Terri recognizes the critical linkage between one's family situation and one's access to education, particularly IHE. She shares the story of a close friend from her undergraduate studies whose grades were similar to hers. Terri thought that her friend would have more advantages in her application for the same CSC funding, as her friend had better English-language skills and a more competitive academic performance. Nevertheless, her friend family's limited financial resource deprived her of such an opportunity.

Her memories of inconsistencies in education opportunities began as early as high school. Terri was born in Beijing. the capital city, which is constantly attracting a large volume of migrants. When she was in high school, her class[19] had many non-local students whose parents were factory workers, taxi drivers, or salespersons. She explains that those occupations do not offer attractive salaries or great social benefits and are therefore are not desirable to Beijingers. For Terri, education helps perpetuate their situation because those families would feel very content if their children are admitted to tier-two universities in the PRC. However, Terri says it would have been a shame to her father if she had not been admitted to a tier-one university because her father has a PhD.

[19] Students in China are organized into class, and the entire class of students attends all classes and activities together.

Terri has strong opinions that children from wealthy families have the privilege to put in less effort because their family's financial power can compensate for this lack of effort: “Many families in China struggle just to get their children into a university, but rich families in Beijing can send their children abroad.” She thinks that those children do not need a competitive academic record and do not have to “suffer from the destruction” of *gaokao*. In her opinion, children from wealthy families do not have to try very hard to get the same result that she worked diligently for in order to earn the national funding to study abroad. Despite the same final result of studying abroad, Terri chose a different path because meeting the funding requirements of her scholarship application was an invaluable learning process for her career development as a future academic.

Navigating a Science Career Free from Parents’ Opinions

Lisa[20] is also pursuing a research-related career path and has planned to continue her studies in university until she completes a doctorate degree. However, she is relying neither on state funding nor on the PRC’s preferential policies for institutional advantage like Sue and Terri. Lisa was fully funded by her parents for her undergraduate studies and is funding herself through a full scholarship for her current master’s degree. She explains that she left the PRC near the end of her high school to avoid *gaokao*.[21] She wants to become a biochemist and chose to study in Canada knowing that her chance of admittance into a top PRC university through *gaokao* was slim. When she proposed studying abroad to her parents, they agreed to support her without

[20] Interview conducted on 4 September 2018 in Toronto.
[21] *Gaokao* is a national university entrance examination held yearly in the PRC. A chapter of this thesis focuses substantially on the analyses of *gaokao*.

question. Lisa clarifies that she is pursuing IHE out of her own interest and that her parents have no expectations for her education outcome. When she decided to continue her studies and pursue a graduate degree, her parents assumed a listener position: "I told them I think protein is cute [she thinks studying about protein is nice] and I said I want to get a master's degree. My parents said yes." Lisa's next IHE step is to pursue a PhD in Australia because she dislikes the cold weather in Canada. She is concerned that her parents will be disappointed and upset that she is giving up the chance of getting the Canadian permanent resident status after seven years of studies in Canada. They were, though, very relaxed and gave her permission to do whatever she wants.

While Lisa feels fully supported by her parents, she also finds that her parents are unable to provide constructive career advice given their different occupational experiences from Lisa's chosen discipline. "Instead of thinking about how my parents have affected me, I'd rather think about how my parents' absence of influence has affected me." Lisa's parents are both investors who have travelled often for work since she was little. She attended boarding school from elementary to high school. Lisa told me that she barely saw her parents and had been very independent since childhood. However, Lisa understands her parents and says that they communicate very effectively: "They can't help it. They need to make money for the family . . . I ask for help when I'm in need, but I enjoy my lifestyle."

Lisa also notes that being a daughter permits her a lot more freedom than her younger brother, who has just started high school. Her parents are taking a very different education approach with him. For instance, Lisa's mother decided to stay at home with the younger brother in order to take care of him during his school years. Lisa explains that her parents want

to send the younger brother to study in Canada for university, and they hope he will want to pursue a degree in Finance. Despite the differences in the way her parents have approached Lisa's and her brother's education, Lisa assures me this is not a result of gender bias, even though she does think that gender-based parenting is very common in the PRC, at least among her relatives and acquaintances. She understands the greater expectations that her parents place on her young brother, but in exchange, Lisa has the freedom she wants.

Resisting the Chinese Political Climate

Sara[22] has a very specific political reason for studying abroad and perceives no benefits to her career prospects by doing so. She is currently a master's student studying East Asian Studies at UT, and, as she states: "I would be financially better-off, much better, if I stayed in China, but Chinese politics unsettles me." Before coming to Canada, Sara worked for four years as a journalist in Beijing at *NetEase*, a leading Chinese internet technology company. When she was gathering materials for her work, she came across a book on the Cultural Revolution, written by her current academic supervisor at UT. The book intrigued her so much that she felt compelled to apply to her current university and program of study. According to her: "My decision to come abroad is primarily guided by my interest in politics."

According to Sara, many Chinese international students are not interested in learning about or being involved in domestic politics. She says that Chinese international students do not really appreciate her interest in revisiting the Cultural Revolution, which many consider to be an outdated and a trivial research matter for graduate studies. Moreover, many of her

[22] Interview conducted on 24 November 2018 in Toronto.

friends and acquaintances do not understand why Sara wants to pursue such a Chinese topic in Canada. In her view, “most of them don’t know why the Cultural Revolution happened. It’s politics. And I don’t think I would have received unbiased knowledge about the details of this revolution [if she was studying in the PRC].” She explains that her pursuit of this topic is inspired by her previous occupation as a journalist and her passion for politics. Although the Chinese government’s tight grip on political issues constrained her career development in political journalism, she does not want to abandon it by pursuing something that is “permitted” by the PRC government. The PRC’s political climate is the main reason that she chose Canada for graduate school. Her plan is to apply for permanent residency in Canada through the Express Entry system.[23] If she succeeds, she will have the flexibility to stay abroad in the future.

Sara does not think her chosen degree and research topic during her IHE will improve her future financial situation. However, she regards her pursuit of her personal interest as more meaningful than pursuing a career for monetary reasons. Although quitting her previous *NetEase* job left her less financially secure, the experience helped her identify her true passion. "If I had gone abroad straight as an undergraduate student, I might have been lost. My job has helped me understand why I went abroad and where my interest is.” In addition, she mentions that the networks she established at *NetEase* serve as a potential backup if her studying abroad plan fails to meet her expectations. She clarifies that this past work experience gives her a sense of security that she can be financially independent, which helps her feel more relaxed about prioritizing her personal interests over financial concerns.

[23] Express Entry is a point-based system allowing graduate degree holders from other countries to apply for Canadian permanent residence status.

From Ploughing Fields to Studying Abroad

Gwen[24] insists that we commence the interview with a discussion of her family situation (a topic I normally raise in the middle of my interview guide) because she believes that this is the first step to understanding her IHE story. She repeatedly emphasizes that the financial hardship her family experienced as she grew up was beyond the imagination of other international students. Gwen describes herself as coming from a three-generation peasant[25] family in a very remote city in Shanxi Province, where gender bias—preferring male children because they can help with agricultural activities—is still prevalent. Born as a female[26] and the fourth child exacerbated the family's already strenuous financial hardship by bringing a great deal of judgement from the community, even from relatives who could not comprehend why the family would continue to raise Gwen. She reveals:

> Donating babies to wealthier families from the city is considered a kind and thoughtful arrangement, but my mom couldn't be certain that I would end up in a family that would treat me well . . . we were under so much horrible pressure, that my mom once thought to end my life. But I understand her dilemma in that dire situation . . .

No doubt the almost unimaginable adversities that Gwen's family faced in the past still bring forth strong emotions, and I noticed her change of voice and emphasis on certain words as she spoke.

Despite these hardships, Gwen managed to complete her undergraduate education in the PRC and came to YU for a graduate degree preparation program. She mentions that her

[24] Interview conducted on 22 September 2018 in Toronto.
[25] In Mandarin language and the PRC context, when one refers to "peasants and agricultural workers" it often connotes lower living standards and low income.
[26] Rural environments in the PRC generally hold the conservative idea that females are less productive for agricultural labour. As a result, male children are usually preferred over female children by agricultural families.

parents came to Canada two years ahead of her and are now working in Alberta. I was surprised by her current family situation considering their history. She explains that her uncle's family immigrated to Alberta about a decade ago, through which Gwen's parents obtained a ten-year visitor visa to Canada. Due to her parents' urgent financial needs, they started working in Canada, though under precarious circumstances. Two years after they settled somewhat in Canada, Gwen's mother proposed to let Gwen further her education in Canada. As Gwen indicates: "Their goal changed from just making money to fighting for my opportunity to see the world. They wanted me to come out to broaden my horizon before I decide what to do next." Nonetheless, this decision was possible only after selling the parents' property in the PRC. Additionally, Gwen's older brother offered his savings for his marriage as financial proof for her student visa application.[27] To Gwen, studying abroad is a significant bet that comes with great family struggles: "If it were not for their strong support, I would have never, ever thought of studying abroad before. No matter economically or otherwise, it seemed impossible to me."

Despite the family's extensive financial and emotional sacrifices to support Gwen's educational opportunity, they do not burden her with family obligations and let her pursue her own interests. Gwen explains that because she is the youngest of four children, she is not expected to assume much family responsibility. This arrangement also made her IHE possible. In the past, her family would not even have imagined a decision as significant as studying abroad. But as her elder siblings all established families and her parents are now working in Canada, they dared to try:

[27] Applying for a student visa in Canada requires applicants to provide financial proof of ability to fund their stay in Canada.

> Now that I am the only one who needs money, my mom thinks it is ok, relatively speaking. Even if it is hard, this is a chance worth trying…We are used to living with uncertainties…Fate brings us good surprises sometimes.

Gwen wholeheartedly cherishes her IHE opportunity and has tentative plans to develop her dream career. Her passion lies in working with children, which has brought her some very enlightening experiences during her undergraduate studies. She volunteered to work with children whose parents face life imprisonment or the death penalty in the PRC, leaving those children without parental custody. She says that working with these children has shaped her mind tremendously. Her goal is to return to her home city in the future and utilize her Canadian education to establish a foundation to transform the lives of local children. She states:

> If I have the ability, I will learn more theoretical things, and maybe I can understand their different behaviours from deeper perspectives, how they are derived, how to give those children more appropriate guidance. Maybe it will affect them later in life.

Despite Gwen's aspirations to combine her work experience and personal interest in a future career, she indicates that this is only her current idea, as she had just started her IHE in Canada two months before the interview.

Meeting Halfway

The stories by both Eric[28] and Louis[29] demonstrate a continuous dialogical process with their fathers. While Eric's father has been more supportive of Eric making his own decisions since he started studying abroad, Louis's father maintains firm parental authority, leaving Louis to try to devise a career trajectory that caters not only to his own interests, but also his father's. Eric is

[28] Interview conducted on 9 November 2018 in Toronto.
[29] Interview conducted on 27 November 2018 in Toronto.

currently a master's student in Finance at UT, where he also completed his undergraduate studies. He believes that his father's encouragement for him to studying abroad was strategic, but he always respected his son's personal decisions. He recalls how his father has tried to consistently shape his perceptions about the prestige of Western universities:

> When I was in primary school, all my father asked me to do was to read English in front of him every day. Growing up, my dad always liked to show me places on a globe, pointing to different countries to tell me that schools like Harvard, MIT, and Yale exist.

Eric's father sent him to private international schools in Guangzhou for his primary and secondary schooling before sending him to a university in Canada. He explains that studying abroad was an opportunity that his father regretted having missed. Eric's grandfather was a Red Army[30] soldier who was very resistant to learning any Western practices, which meant that he strongly opposed Eric's father's desire to study English. This language deficiency meant he never had the opportunity to study abroad. He made up for this regret by encouraging Eric to embrace the English language and Western culture as much as possible.

Even under his father's pervasive influence, Eric believes that his upbringing was considerably loose compared to many other Chinese students his age. Together with his parents, they negotiated all of the decisions regarding studying abroad and career planning. His parents never imposed their opinions on Eric or overrode his personal decisions. Eric humourously commented that: "My parents are both very bad [speaking with laughter]. They would instill ideas in me indirectly, but not forcefully. But then it was up to me to decide exactly where to go." Although studying abroad was originally his father's idea, as he matured, Eric's

[30] A short form for the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army, or People's Red Army, which was the armed forces of the Communist Party of China.

views on education gradually merged with those of his father. Choosing Canada as the destination due to its relatively simple immigration policy was actually Eric's decision, while his father initially wanted him to go to the United States. Similarly, choosing to study Finance was a general suggestion from his father, but Eric had the final say:

> My dad wanted me to go into investment, but I chose Actuarial Science. But then I thought that Actuarial Science was not for me, so I switched back to investment. So, I made that choice and tried it out and made my final call.

Eric expresses his gratitude toward his father for respecting all the decisions that Eric has made, believing that such respect has provided him with a lot of freedom. In return, Eric says that he contentedly remains open to discussion with his parents on decisions about his future.

Louis has a more elaborate career plan and credits his father with playing an indispensable role in shaping his education and career trajectory. Louis plans to return home after graduation from UT. He is majoring in Statistics, with a keen interest in Big Data. He foresees great potential in applying his Statistics knowledge in the expanding PRC market, because he thinks Big Data is very promising in the PRC, considering that the country's information technology (IT) industry and internet businesses are booming:

> Alibaba [a Chinese company similar to Amazon] is in Hangzhou [Louis's hometown]. I think Jack Ma is working on Big Data to expand his business. I can go to Alibaba for an internship after I graduate . . . I know Taobao [another enterprise by Jack Ma] definitely needs Big Data . . . Everything in the future will run on Big Data. It's a Big Data era . . . hospitals need it to monitor their patients . . . large businesses need it to manage their sales.

Despite his positive career vision involving Big Data, such a career aspiration was neither his nor his father's original idea; rather, they met each other halfway. Louis's father owns a high-end designer clothing company in Hangzhou. The family business is quite stable and the father has the ambition, but so far not the ability, to list the company on the stock exchange. Louis

explains that his father regrets not continuing his own education after high school and thinks that his limited knowledge of modern business operations is like a shackle restraining him from reaching his goal. As such, the father really wanted Louis to pursue a Business Administration-related degree.

Louis, on the contrary, has always been passionate about the fashion design industry and originally intended to study fashion design in London. However, his father opposed him pursuing a career in design, knowing from experience that such a field could be very risky and turbulent if Louis was not exceptional. His father suggested a degree in Business Administration as a much safer option. Although Louis expresses that he remains critical of some of his father's opinions, he does agree with his father on program selection. Nonetheless, Louis managed to negotiate with his father. Louis was admitted to nine Canadian universities and ceded to his father's preference for UT, based solely on its prestige. Louis still wonders if choosing another school might have turned out better for him— cheaper tuition and a less stressful school environment—but his father was firm on the value of UT credentials.

In exchange for allowing his father to choose the institution, Louis had the final say in choosing Statistics as his program of study, but only after persuading his father of Statistics' expansive application to business. Louis admits that he compromised somewhat in order to gain his father's support:

> The main thing is that if he doesn't support me, I can't come out [study abroad] . . . My biggest interest is still designing . . . My father stopped bugging me now and I can learn designing as a side thing from my study; school and hobby aren't conflicting, although I can't study design professionally.

Louis says that he will continue to negotiate with his father for a career related to design. He feels obligated to fulfill his family responsibility because he is the only son and will inherit the

family business. Additionally, he sees himself playing a critical role in transforming the business into a world-class brand name with a global presence. He thinks that this goal is a perfect opportunity to combine his Big Data knowledge, his passion for design, and his father's ambitions for business expansion. For this, Louis is already considering applying to an MBA program in the near future to gain knowledge of international business operations.

Louis is ambitious and he acknowledges that his plan is very practical. His father has been in the same industry for many decades and has established extensive local networks within and beyond his field. Louis is confident that he can locate highly competent business partners within these networks. More importantly, he has no doubt that he can gain business support from his father when needed. As I listen back to my interview recording, I can hear the joy in his voice when he describes his plan. If he realizes his plan, it will both honour his father's ambition and preserve his own keen passion for fashion design.

Cultivating an Entrepreneurial Mind

Sam[31] is an entrepreneurial Chinese international student, an owner of a registered fitness company in Canada and a third-year undergraduate student at YU. Although he also experienced a process of negotiation with his parents while abroad, specifically regarding his entrepreneurial idea, refusing to follow his parents' opinion was an integral component of his entrepreneurial success to date. He believes that: "the environment change from China to Canada was the key to my mindset change." He claims that he started the company from scratch during his current undergraduate studies without any financial assistance from his

[31] Interview conducted on 19 September 2018 in Toronto

parents. Knowing that I relied on my parents for all of my expenses during my undergraduate studies in Canada, I am impressed by Sam's drive and capability to establish a business in a foreign country in the midst of his studies. He tells me that he developed his entrepreneurial mindset while abroad: "I didn't think much about starting a business before I went abroad." This is a process of "later evolution," as he considers his IHE experience to be an independent path from which he has been able to translate his education values into a meaningful pursuit.

Sam tells me that prior to studying in Canada, starting a business was something he could only imagine, but not do, due to fears of the responsibilities and efforts required. While he was preparing to depart for Canada, the ambitions he shared with his parents were simple —he just wanted to have a foreign degree, a very stable job, and live a life of "three points a day."[32] He credits the university environment in Canada with providing him space to think freely and with a platform to fully exercise his ideas. This environment provides the freedom he was seeking:

> After I came to Canada, I had the freedom to choose what kind of dormitory to live in and what kind of food to eat . . . The atmosphere here gives me the autonomy to choose freely, encouraging me to think that all my actions are responsible for my future from now on.

Another aspect of studying abroad that has stimulated his entrepreneurial mindset is Canada's diverse socio-cultural environment, which he thinks would be hard to find on a Chinese university campus. Sam feels that he benefits more from his interactions with people from different countries and cultures than from learning about new cultural and social norms. He explains that the diversity on the YU campus stimulates critical thinking, inviting one to view

[32] "Three points a day" is a casual way of describing in Mandarin a daily schedule that is very stable.

any question from multiple angles, and more importantly, to think beyond the perspective an ordinary Chinese international student:

> I used to think that things were either black or white or right or wrong when I was in China. But the mosaic of cultures in Canada creates the possibility to expose newcomers to diversity and pluralistic values . . . I asked myself why I wanted to study abroad . . . I don't think learning from professors is the only answer. I can learn from myself.

Sam thinks that the YU campus environment has helped him appreciate the beauty and value of being multifaceted, while also encouraging him to think critically and comprehensively in assessing situations. He admits that his newfound open-mindedness will help him present himself in an international context with more confidence.

Sam says that he gradually formed his ambition and entrepreneurial idea. After travelling a long distance and having his parents to commit to making a large financial investment in his education, he was searching for an outcome greater than just a degree. Sam is a bodybuilding enthusiast and he quickly realized that many Chinese international students in Toronto have a great interest in fitness but possess little knowledge about fitness training. This sparked his business idea to establish a company that tailors fitness services, from training to nutrition, for Chinese clients throughout the Greater Toronto Area. To him, starting a business from within the university then expanding it outwards was a fantastic opportunity to build a client base among his targeted group of Chinese international students. Sam's parents opposed his startup idea as they thought it would affect his studies. He understood his parents' simple expectation of him—graduate with a university degree from Canada—but he nonetheless followed his instinct. Launching a business without one's parents' financial support would certainly be difficult, or impossible, for most Chinese international students who rely on their

families to cover their IHE costs. Nevertheless, Sam capitalized on his networks with Chinese international students and the local Chinese community to raise funds by means of a shareholding system, which he explained is a snowballing fund-raising strategy to allocate shares held in his company.

The experience that he is gaining in Canada directly feeds into his leadership as an entrepreneur. At the age of 25, Sam has encountered and learned from many real-world business challenges, like learning to appreciate his employees' needs:

> I think deeply about what my employees need when they come to apply for jobs. Everyone has different needs . . . I know that they come to make money. But in fact, many employees are less driven by money . . . they look for better career and personal development . . . Running a business has taught me the fundamental skill to think from others' perspectives.

Sam expressed a desire to transfer what he is learning and feeling in Canada back home when he returns after his studies to expand his business in the PRC, where he sees a larger consumer base and a growing fitness culture.

Remedying an Early Mistake

John[33] depicts his IHE experience, from preparing studying abroad to his actual studies, as a process of reconciliation. After his second year of high school in the PRC, John became resistant to *gaokao* and the Chinese style of education, which he describes as being too forceful and placing too much pressure on students. At that time, he thought studying abroad could be an easier and more relaxed alternative than continuing his education in the PRC. However, the extended amount of time required to focus on just learning English changed his previous

[33] Interview conducted on 13 September 2018 in Toronto.

perception of studying abroad as an easy alternative; in fact, it was a process similar to what he imagined he would endure to prepare for *gaokao*.

Similar to his preparations for IHE, he described his current IHE experience as remedying an earlier mistake. According to John:

> I chose my current major [computer engineering] because I needed to make up for my mistake in the past . . . there was a good opportunity in front of me, but I didn't cherish it. And then after two years of travelling on my bumpy road, I realized that interest is interest, and reality is reality.

John was initially admitted to the engineering school at UT, but he was quite rebellious during that time and rejected the UT offer in spite of his parents' attempts to persuade him. Instead, he studied Visual Arts at a local college in the PRC because he wanted to try something different. Despite his ambition and interest, he later realized that he could not support himself by pursuing a career in Visual Arts. When he eventually completed his final portfolio after three days without sleep, he cried. The teacher was compassionate and gave him a score that was high enough to graduate.

Although his Visual Arts studies were difficult, John thinks this experience has paid off. After he started engineering studies at YU, he was inspired to combine his design and programming skills for a future career in video game design. John emphasizes that this new career path is more than just an idea or interest in something; instead, he claims to have become more mature by remedying his past experience. As he says: "My parents outlined a smooth path for me, I chose to walk on pebbles, and they had to help clean up the mess [fund him again for a different degree study]." From John's perspective, thinking without practicing is not enough and studying abroad provides him with a platform to learn from remedying his mistakes. John now appreciates his parents' efforts, knowing that an engineering degree can

help him establish a better foothold economically. He is determined to complete his engineering degree at all costs.

John says he has also become more independent as a result of his IHE experience. He claims that many unexpected situations during his study in Canada have helped him gain confidence and exercise his ability to solve problems under pressure and in precarious circumstances. He shares a story about the first night he arrived in Toronto. His Airbnb host suddenly cancelled his reservation, it was midnight, and he had nowhere to stay after a long flight from his hometown. He felt lost and helpless but decided not to contact his parents until the issue was solved.[34] Later that evening, John travelled to the YU campus and found a local security guard who drove him to the university hotel. John humorously and positively appraised the incident, which eventually led him to a comfortable hotel with breakfast included the next morning. Additionally, he was proud of himself for being able to negotiate the room cost by half. John finished his story with a very inspirational ending:

> Why do I want to mention this incident? Student life in Canada has forced me to stay calm, to be brave to accept negative outcomes, and to find a way to solve them. This is being independent. . . I told my myself that one day no matter where I go, no matter what I do, no matter what happens to me, I can take good care of myself.

John's Airbnb incident suggests the development of a sense of independence. His remedying of experiences in the past suggests that he has benefited from those difficult situations and now is able to approach his IHE with more confidence and certainty.

[34] Airbnb is an online hospitality service that arranges primarily homestays.

Finding a Hierarchy of "Tastes"

Liz[35] considers herself a rare case of a Chinese international student. She explains that students like her are studying fashion, art history, luxury management, and other very fancy programs because their families are in need of this type of pursuit. I conducted the interview at Liz's luxury condominium in the heart of downtown Toronto, where Liz's family owns several properties. Both of her parents are graduate degree holders and real estate developers in Beijing. Her pet phrase of "tastes" left a deep impression, which she explained as a mindset subconsciously instilled by her parents that her family cannot accept mediocrity. The condominium she lives in, the shoes she wears, and the restaurants she visits are examples she gives that separate her from the "plain folks." Liz's parents pay considerable attention to creating a "healthy" environment to ensure that she interacts with the "appropriate" individuals. Initially, she tried to make friends in Canada without discriminating based on wealth; however, past experiences have taught her that financial concerns that negatively impact one's ability to keep up with the same interests eventually dissolve relationships. She believes that networking with people with comparable backgrounds can help her family maintain their current standard of living in the future.

Liz says that studying abroad has strengthened her sense of hierarchy and helped her figure out with whom she wants to interact. "Going abroad feels like jumping from one circle to another. I feel like my world is getting bigger first, then smaller. I meet all kinds of people, then know to which group I belong." Before her family moved to Beijing, they were living in the province of Inner Mongolia, where her class had students with more diverse family

[35] Interview conducted on 1 December 2018 in Toronto.

backgrounds. Her sense of elitism became clear when she transferred to a private international high school in the United States where other Chinese students were all very generous and hospitable and where no one seemed to be restrained by money. Although she is still connected with her previous school acquittances and even some relatives on social media, those who remain in the PRC are largely living a lifestyle distant from her own. For Liz, studying abroad immediately excludes those students and their families who are not supposed to be socializing in the same circle. She explained:

> I feel a gap between me and my classmates back in Inner Mongolia . . . at that time, I thought my family was no different . . . just our house was bigger . . . In Canada, people I know all have quite a taste for arts . . . Something you don't pursue until you go abroad . . . when you experience it, you aspire for higher things.

Furthermore, the hierarchy of "tastes" helps her distinguish herself from other Chinese international students who are come from non-elite families. Liz's parents offer her a "healthy" environment in order to enhance her sense of elitism, which will eventually help improve her family's current status. "Having money is not wrong, but having no money can go very wrong." She perceives her past schooling and her current IHE experiences as a constant reminder of whom she aspires to be and with whom she should interact.

Liz acknowledges her family's financial strength in making her IHE an elite experience, and she thinks that finances can be a major hindrance to one's personal development: "there are a lot of opportunities out there that Chinese students want but are afraid to pursue. Like, what if something goes wrong during their time abroad?" She explains that Chinese students coming from middle-income families have a fear or at least a concern about studying abroad, as they may feel pressure, insecurity, and uncertainty. But for families like hers, students can just

start over with something else if studying abroad does not work out in the end. She uses the analogy of distributing eggs in baskets: financially privileged families have options to distribute more eggs in multiple baskets; in contrast, the less privileged families are at risk of placing all their eggs in one basket if they decide to study abroad. She believes that wealthy families are capable of buffering risks if the eggs crack, and can provide insurance for alternatives.

Liz also thinks that Chinese students' career development is connected to their family situation, specifically parental influence on students' programs of study. She thinks that families that have an average income would hope that their children graduate from a program that could promise substantial financial returns. However, her parents want her to prioritize her interests and actually prefer that she study arts.

> I applied and got admitted to the UT Engineering school because I challenged myself, but I didn't accept the offer. I thought studying Engineering would make me lose my hair, and I hoped to grow happily [humourous tone]. . . . My parents also discouraged me from studying Engineering as it is too brain-intensive.

Being the second child of the family, Liz dodged the "fascist" parenting style that her parents imposed on her older sister, who is currently a doctoral candidate at New York University and a real estate investor. Her parents hope to raise at least one child who will become a high achiever in order to maintain the family's "face."[36] She notes: "Sending me and my sister to study abroad boosts my dad's 'face' among his friends and siblings." Because her sister's academic achievement has satisfied the family's need for "face," Liz is given more control over her own education. To her, studying abroad is only for her personal development and will not change her family's current situation. *Fangyang* ("free-ranging" in Mandarin) is an analogy that

[36] Face, or *mianzi* in Mandarin, is popularly referred to for one's self-consciousness of pride, reputation, and respect from others.

Liz uses to describe her extensive freedom. Additionally, Liz's parents hope that she develops her "taste" for the arts. A week before our interview, Liz visited London just to attend an auction and purchased a vase. An activity like this may seem shocking to many Chinese international students, including me; however, Liz said that art collection is a conversation topic that help her connect with people of a similar mind.

Liz is confident that her parents' *guanxi* (social networks) in the PRC effectively eliminates all her future employment concerns, at least in the PRC. While she thinks that finding a job in Canada depends more on her own strengths, she believes that employment in the PRC relies largely on her family connections. Reliance on *guanxi* is extremely common among her friends and relatives. Additionally, no matter how competitive the job market is in Beijing, her parents can effortlessly find her a well-paid position. Her parents' *guanxi* is so extensive that they can even reach out to a top-tier university, as they did when they connected Liz's sister with a professor from Tsinghua University (a top Chinese university) when she was preparing for her doctoral research. As for Liz's own internship experience:

> Just like my summer internship in China, when I worked as a research assistant in a microbiology lab, I just started working there after my parents said hello [to their contacts at the lab]. After that, it was up to whether I like it there or not.

Although *guanxi* is a convenience for Liz, she understands that many people may not have such a "door" leading to employment opportunities. *Guanxi* is a very common aspect of the work environment of the PRC, so much so that she thinks that she will be at a disadvantage, or even be mocked by her peers for trying to look tough and showing off, if she refuses to capitalize on her family's *guanxi*.

Studying to "Look Good"

Shirley is also from a privileged family background and thinks that her IHE goal of becoming a history researcher and her pursuit of elite credentials enhances her family's social status. Shirley is currently a master's student in History at UT and claims to be preparing applications for PhD programs at Ivy League universities in the United States. She emphasizes the importance of an institution's ranking and its reputation for returnees' career prospects. Shirley thinks that no matter how high-achieving and hardworking a returnee is, they will have difficulties translating their overseas training into an employment advantage if China-based employers do not recognize their university. This is exactly the reason why Shirley chose UT, despite receiving an offer of a full scholarship from two other Canadian universities that had more suitable advisors for her master's research. Nonetheless, Shirley notes that Chinese employers and the public are increasingly aware of the phenomenon of education capitalism[37] and that overseas returnees face challenges from the deteriorating reputation of non-elite foreign universities, as discussed earlier in the section on "wild chicken" institutions.

Shirley thinks that the prestige of an elite university also helps her family "look good." Even though her parents think that her planned career is "hopeless" for making money, they are very content with her academic achievements thus far and are proud to continue financing her education. Shirley explains that supporting a scholarly daughter speaks highly of a family's financial strength and open-mindedness, especially in an environment in which the traditional gender-based concept that women are not expected to work harder than men and take on

[37] In Shirley's understanding, education capitalism entails the current situation whereby Chinese students are able to study abroad as long as they have the money. This understanding does not reflect the academic literature on education capitalism; however, it does raise concerns from her personal perspective.

financial responsibility for the family persists. Shirley says that this is particularly true for her parents' generation in her home city of Shantou, a southern city where a working-class or business woman suggests the inability of a family to free its women from financial concerns and is an indication on a constrained family situation. She recites "大家闺秀"— meaning elegant female figures from elite families — as a cultural phrase to describe the type of women who are able to dedicate herself to pursuing literature, art, calligraphy, painting, and other artistic activities while being fully supported by a high-status family background. Even without a perceived financial return to her family, Shirley thinks her anticipated academic career is a very aesthetic pursuit, which she believes can enhance her family's social status.

Her academic achievements aside, Shirley admits that her parents' support is vital for her academic pursuits, notably her parents' full financial aid and satisfaction with her academic achievements. Shirley's father works in the finance field and her mother is a doctor. She considers her parents as working in very "practical" occupations and her parents can hardly grasp the practicality of a career in history. Their original expectations for Shirley were marriage and children after she completed her undergraduate degree. Shirley's academic achievements, however, exceeded their expectations. Her goal of becoming a published urban historian conveniently satisfies her parents' needs, as raising a very scholarly daughter without financial concerns is culturally considered a source of family pride for many parents in the PRC. As such, her parents are proud to continue financing Shirley's education and applaud her for her ambition to obtain a PhD.

Shirley mentions that her family's *guanxi* is another form of assurance for her future employment, if one day she decides to pursue a career outside of history. Her parents have business partners in Canada who could arrange a stable job for her. According to her:

> "I know some uncles[38] in Shantou who are doing business in BC [British Columbia] and Toronto. They are in a really good long-term business relationship with my dad…when they come here, they usually take me out for dinner…I can work for their trade companies one day if studying history fails me…"

Although her parents cannot help her in her field of study, they can easily secure for her a competitive office position at a state-owned enterprise in the PRC, a job that most people could only dream about. For example, her sister graduated from a trade school in the PRC but is working in the same office as her co-workers, who are all graduate degree holders. Her parents' connections provide her with a sense of security that eliminates any employment concerns and helps her concentrate on her current scholarly pursuit.

Shirley thinks that Chinese students from wealthy family backgrounds generally choose to return to the PRC, particularly students from tier-one cities.[39] She explains that these students' families have properties, family businesses, and robust networks that lay a solid foundation for returnees to build upon their existing family advantages. To support her viewpoint, Shirley uses the example of her two cousins who studied in the United Kingdom and returned to the PRC to maximize their IHE value. Their parents own a business that manufactures products for export. As the family business operation was limited in its knowledge of the export trade, the parents always needed outreach partners to communicate with foreign clients. Now that their children have returned, they are utilizing their newly

[38] "Uncle" is a casual way of referring to older males in China. In Shirley's case, she uses this word to refer to her dad's business partners.
[39] Rereference to the most developed cities in China, including Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, and Shenzhen.

acquired knowledge of trade and exporting, their English skills, and their overseas connections to facilitate the family's business expansion.

Shirley is personally interested in social stratification in the PRC, which is also the topic of her master's thesis research. She considers the activity of studying abroad as a reflection of the PRC's current stratified society. Shirley shares her extensive thoughts on access to education and social stratification in response to my last interview question, where I invite my interviewees to comment freely. She explains that the true lower-class or families that are living at the bottom of PRC society cannot even afford domestic university tuition, let alone studying abroad opportunities. She mentions the *Household Registration System* and the *Urban-rural Dual System* as the two policies that shackle social-class migration from the rural to the more developed areas. She explains that to study in city schools, rural students have to pay higher fees than local students when rural families are already struggling to survive in the city. Even though a lot of Chinese students are studying abroad today, she says that these students are only a small percentage of the overall Chinese university student population, within which most are living at or below the middle class. She continues that most Chinese parents in this social class would consider investment in property and opening a small local businesses as more practical than sending their children to study abroad.

To enhance her point on social stratification, Shirley recommends to me a novel called the *Folding Beijing*[40]*,* an award-winning work that portrays a future version of Beijing, where one social class lives in a separate dimension from and is dominated by the higher class. She quotes the author: "Beijing city can be folded like a transformer, but with a colder sense of

[40] https://uncannymagazine.com/article/folding-beijing-2/

reality."[41] She says that the novel reflects the stratified living of Chinese students in Toronto because the social lives of Chinese international students from different class backgrounds rarely intersect, even though they all study in Toronto:

> You can tell a lot from where students eat. I eat Chinatown dim sum with my classmates, but I also eat two-hundred-dollar high-end sushi with my roommate . . . My roommate would think my classmates are living under the poverty level . . . My roommate is actually a very nice girl, but she shows prejudice unconsciously when comparing [others' lifestyles] with her own lifestyle.

She says that students from different social classes receive different educational experiences, even when they receive the same education, and to a significant extent their family's financial strength determines the types of food that students eat and the types of entertainment they enjoy. Shirley acknowledges that her personal experiences as an international student in Toronto have strengthened her understanding of social stratification.

[41] Based on my brief research about the novelette, the analogy of a transformer suggests the city's ability to dramatically transform its appearance and functionality from one state to another. Cold reality suggests a cruel contrast from the stratification of life styles between different transformations.

CHAPTER FIVE — EXPLORING THE ELITE AND NON-ELITE DISPOSITIONS

From developing exquisite "tastes" to negotiating family prosperity and exploring institutional advantage, this chapter explores the diverse narratives of international higher education (IHE) by a group of Chinese international students studying in Toronto. Their narratives reveal that the students who engage in IHE come from diverse family situations, which to a large extent determine the value of IHE to individual students and their families. I discern individual and family dispositions, particularly the differences between the elites and non-elites, by analyzing the diverse ways in which they approach IHE. Their decision-making processes during their studies abroad reveals that students and their parents have varying (in)abilities to mobilize resources, reflecting a stratified landscape of IHE participation, which in turn partially reflects the social stratification phenomenon in the People's Republic of China (PRC). *I maintain that while individual and family dispositions shape students' decision-making processes in distinct ways during their study abroad, there are shared realities and socialization experiences, respectively, among elite and non-elite students.*

The narratives by Liz and Shirley confirm on how elite Chinese students and their parents capitalize on their ample family resources to create elite IHE experiences and free the students from any future employment and financial concerns. Their narratives suggest there are elite dispositions toward accumulating specific forms of cultural and social capital, both of which are believed to be potent in enhancing their current social status and elite privilege in the PRC. In contrast, I group together and analyze the narratives by Louis, Sam, Terri, Sue, Sara, and Lisa for their non-elite dispositions. I demonstrate that these students' IHE experiences are shaped by a combination of individual, family, and institutional factors that shape their

distinctive IHE motivations and divergent career trajectories. As a result, I identify their decision-making processes as tactical, strategic, or the result of compromise. Table 1 shows the distinctions between and categorizations of elite and non-elite dispositions as well as the associated features I observed in the aforementioned interviews.

Table 2. Categorization of Elite and Non-elite Dispositions and Features

Strategies within Elite Dispositions	Non-elite Dispositions
Cultural Activities: "tastes" and "participation in highbrow cultural activities" for elite status and social success.	*Tactical Decision-making:* balancing between student and parental expectations while experiencing changes in socialization experiences.
Education Discourse: "healthy" educational environment and university prestige for elite socialization.	*Strategic Decision-making:* relying on exploring specific state policies and programs for institutional advantage.
Social Capital: elite *guanxi* eliminating career concerns, as part of the elite conversion formula between cultural, economic, and social capital accumulation for resource advantage.	*Compromise Decision-making:* accommodating the having-to aspects of life in order to achieve certain goals.

Elite Dispositions

The socially reproductive aspect of education in Bourdieu's cultural reproduction framework—privileged families capitalizing on their vast resources to provide their children with more opportunities and elevate their educational experiences—is observable within the IHE experiences of Liz and Shirley (Darvin & Norton, 2014; Findlay et al., 2012; King & Raghuram, 2013; Waters, 2006, 2009, 2012; Xiang & Shen, 2009, Xie et al., 2018a; 2018b). According to Bourdieu, the cycle of cultural reproduction and social reproduction is perpetuated through the conversion between three primary forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social (Bourdieu, 1973). Elite families tend to be less concerned about the material returns on education, such as the increased economic capital that results from career betterment; instead, they are more

interested in the symbolic returns from elite education such as cultural and social capital (Kelly & Lusis, 2006; Waters & Brooks, 2010).

Liz and Shirley's experiences reflect an "aesthetic disposition," a characteristic described by Waters and Brooks (2010) as the decision-making process of elite families that are relatively uninterested in the career objectives of their international-student progeny. This can be interpreted as a type of embodied cultural capital, a sub-category within the broader categorization of cultural capital in Bourdieu's framework (Throsby, 1999). The value of accumulating embodied cultural capital (also institutional and objectified cultural capital, as mentioned below) lies within the operation of cultural capital. Cultural capital accumulation supports and is supported by the already accumulated economic and social capital. It has also been argued to be an important channel for strengthening the elite's social success for class reproduction (Findlay et al., 2012; Waters, 2009; Xiang & Shen, 2009). Because of their ample family resources, Liz and Shirley have the privilege of refining their elite status, as their aesthetic dispositions—featured here as cosmopolitanism, worldliness, high mobility, and an explicit endorsement of the Western lifestyle— reinforce their elite social position.

Elite disposition is observable through the specific cultural activities in which Liz partakes while studying in Canada. "Tastes," a hierarchical mindset she frequently referenced, was something she described as a mindset of not tolerating mediocrity, purposefully instilled in her by her parents. This reflects an elite disposition of searching for a sense of belonging to elite culture. Her "tastes" materialize in various forms of objectified cultural capital, for example, her luxury condominium located in an expensive area in downtown Toronto and her exquisite art collection. Her narrative of travelling to London a week prior to our interview just to purchase a

vase from an auction reflects her family's ample financial means, and that her family places great importance on such a luxurious cultural activity.

Utilizing Bourdieu's framework for cultural reproduction, Xie et al., (2018b) suggest that cultural practices for cultural capital accumulation are part of a fierce competition among the contemporary elite Chinese families wanting to maintain their privileged status. The authors contend that these cultural practices, as part of elite family strategies, have the potential to "demystify" elite privileges and the mechanisms they deploy to perpetuate class stratification in the PRC. This argument is reflected in Liz's personal explanation that her elite cultural activities like attending the vase auction help her develop "tastes" that are similar to the tastes of people with comparable family backgrounds. Consequently, her "tastes," supported by her family's cultural strategies, include the accumulation of embodied and objectified cultural capital. These things contribute to her development of an aesthetic and elite disposition, which she and her family expect in order to maintain their current social status.

Although less interested in objectified cultural capital than Liz, Shirley's academic study of history is an elegant subject and thus a potent tool in enhancing her family's social status in the PRC. Simply put, studying history abroad is an aesthetic and embodied cultural pursuit for Shirley's family. As she explained, by being able to support her, a scholarly woman, in studying a subject that her parents believe has little potential for financial returns (economic capital) speaks highly of her family's financial strength and open-mindedness within her parents' social circle. "Highbrow cultural activity participation" is an idea advanced by Xie et al., (2018b, p. 30-36) to describe the partaking of very artistic activities such as literature, calligraphy, painting, singing, and dancing. This cultural participation is an integrated cultural capital and strategic

investment to negotiate cultural advantages for social success. Shirley contributes to maintaining her family's current social status by developing an academic career in History, which functions as a "highbrow cultural activity." Similar to Liz's "taste" for art, "highbrow cultural activity" is not for immediate material returns, but rather part of the cultural capital strategy practiced by elite families for perpetuating social success.

Liz and Shirley also hint at elite disposition when they speak of their education trajectories. Liz's parents, in particular, have strategically relocated her from Inner Mongolia to Beijing, then to the United States, and then Canada, in order to find a "healthy" educational environment so that she can be surrounded by other wealthy students. Liz is self-conscious about her gradually developed elite disposition by "jumping from one circle to another" (referring to the change in her educational environments), which eventually acclimatized her to elite socialization. This elite education discourse is also observed in Shirley's narrative, as she and her family weigh the credentials (institutional cultural capital) gained from attending elite universities. As her experience with graduate school admission has demonstrated, financial assistance, the actual learning, and the research experiences all become less significant than the university's prestige. Her eager pursuit of prestige suggests elites' interest in establishing a competitive edge using institutional cultural capital. This is particularly important in the contemporary context of IHE, where the number of Chinese students going abroad and returning is rising. When general participation in IHE loses its effectiveness in status distinction in the PRC, the prestige of foreign universities will become a new site for elites to negotiate their privileges.

Social capital has the potential to become a critical nexus for understanding the relationship between elite disposition and how elite students conceive of their career trajectories. Liz's case of searching for a "healthy" educational environment in order to socialize with other elites suggests that social mobility is still important for elites; however, the nuance here is that elites are less concerned about upward and vertical mobility, and instead, are in need of outward and horizontal mobility to expand their elite networks. This elite way of socialization is part of the elite dispositions and strategies. *Guanxi* is a type of social capital that is highly complex and extremely powerful for job search and job acquisition in the PRC (Huang, 2008). According to Huang, *guanxi* ties and professional ties in the PRC are interconnected and transformable to each other. This suggests that the convertibility of social capital to employment advantages in specific geographical contexts is heightened. As Waters (2009) discovered, in Hong Kong, place-based social capital confers extra value—or valorizes, using the vocabulary chosen by the author—to the cultural capital possessed by privileged social groups. Waters highlights that research needs to examine the employment consequences of recognizing international academic credentials in relation to localized social capital.

There is a difference in how social capital operates in elite and non-elite socialization, with implications for Chinese international students' employment prospects in the PRC that determines Chinese international students' employment prospects. I specifically asked about *guanxi* during all the interview sessions. Whereas most of my interviewees said *guanxi*'s effect in the modern PRC is declining, as is the reliability of their parents' *guanxi* networks in guaranteeing them future employment, Liz and Shirley showed absolute confidence in their families' *guanxi.* They shared with me stories of their families successfully leveraging *guanxi* to

find them work placements, and believed that *guanxi* was capable of eliminating their employment concerns, regardless of whether they are qualified for the work positions or not. Moreover, they assured me that using *guanxi* is extremely common within their social networks, so much so that opting not to receive *guanxi* assistance from their parents may put them at severe disadvantage vis-à-vis their peers.

Elite social capital bolsters the development of elite disposition. It is also part of Bourdieu's capital conversion formula for how elites secure their resource advantage. The elite operation of *guanxi* helps explain why Liz and Shirley's families place unapparelled value on selecting a "healthy" educational environment and university prestige. For one thing, partaking of elite education offers opportunities for social networking with other elite families, and the symbolic pursuit of prestige also enhances their existing social status. In addition, their enhanced social status, along their already and newly established *guanxi* networks, provides career security, which in turn leads to the accumulation of economical capital. The cycle is sustained when the next generation utilizes resources to once again gain an advantage in cultural reproduction.

Non-elite Dispositions

Coming from non-elite families, Louis and Sam cannot prioritize aesthetic dispositions in guiding their IHE experiences. They cannot enjoy "highbrow cultural activities" and "tastes" during their studies, and neither do they possess powerful *guanxi* to free them from worrying about their future careers and finances. Instead, their IHE narratives are full of experiences during which they have to strike a balance between personal and parental expectations in order to maximize

the value of their IHE investment. As such, their narratives do not present strategies by which they mobilize cultural, social, and economic capital for reproducing elite status. This less aesthetic and reproductive manner of IHE participation provides opportunities to observe how non-elite Chinese families fare during their educational migration experiences. This is where the newly proposed Bourdieu-de Certeau framework for this research becomes useful, specifically for the concept of tactic, in capturing the non-strategic and contingent dispositions of non-elite students during their IHE experiences.

Given that the tactics used by non-elites differ from the strategies pursued by elites during their IHE, I use another set of conceptual tools, namely, the concept of filial piety from Confucius's teachings and the concept of competency development from the *Career Capital Theory* (CCT). These two concepts represent two entirely different types of socialization experiences, in Eastern societies like the PRC and Western societies like Canada, respectively. Moreover, they are compatible with how Bourdieu theorizes the dispositions of different social classes based on their distinctive socializations. As I demonstrate through empirical examples, while the Confucian perspective on filial piety accentuates socialization within family units, like obeying parental authority, the Western liberal perspective on competency development puts more emphasis on individual self-actualization. In other words, the former praises the collective socialization experience while the latter prioritizes the individual socialization experience.

Based on these two contrasting types of socialization experiences, I argue that some non-elite Chinese international students are situated at the centre, as they are caught between the Confucian perspective on filial piety and the Western liberal perspective on individual improvement. Non-elite student narratives become a productive site for understanding how

their dispositions evolve under the co-influence of the two distinctive socialization experiences, and equally important is whether and how these two socializations might shape non-elite students' career trajectories. This research focus has become particularly valuable because IHE is increasingly accessed by non-elite and middle-class families from the PRC, and consequently, employment competition is becoming fiercer with the increasing number of overseas returnees in the PRC.

Tactical Decision-Making

Non-elite disposition is observable through the tactical decision-making process in which students have to balance between parental expectations and self-interest. Louis has to be tactical in maintaining an ongoing negotiation with his father in order to preserve his personal interests and career ambitions. Originally, he wanted to study fashion design in London, but he ended up in Toronto studying statistics, solely because of his father's desires and opinion. His situation is captured by the concept of filial piety, a Confucian socialization process emphasizing parental authority (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Choi & Nieminen, 2013; Deutsch, 2006; Fong, 2004). It appears that Louis's father is unsupportive of Louis's personal interests; however, this unyielding parental intervention echoes the essential teaching of filial piety, specifically on education matters whereby parents try their best to ensure optimal education for their children, and in return children are morally obligated to honour parental instructions (Bodycott & Lai, 2012; Choi & Nieminen, 2013 Chou, 2010).

Louis's education discourse demonstrates that a non-elite family disposition influenced by socialization from filial piety has a powerful but not forceful effect on one's individual

trajectory. Louis does have some discretion in weighing his options and making choices. As he explained, his father's disagreement with his desire to studying fashion design was actually out of a benevolent concern for wanting a more promising career path for his son. Even though the father owns a designer clothing business in the PRC, he foresees the declining prominence for such a business in the PRC in the future. Therefore, he refused to let Louis inherit the family business. Louis's understanding reflects the reciprocal aspects of filial piety, in that students are motivated to appreciate their parents' viewpoints (Guan et al., 2016; Lindstrom et al., 2007; Sun, McHale, & Updegraff, 2017). His relationship with his father, specifically their different interests that eventually resulted in agreement on Louis's choice of major, echoes Waters' (2008) discovery that Chinese international students are prepared to prioritize family concerns over individual concerns. Similarly, this relationship is supported by Bodycott and Lai's (2012) survey-based findings that 100 percent of his Chinese international student respondents believed that their parents were acting in the best interest of the family, even though they all also reported various extents of parental intervention.

However, having lived in the Canadian cultural and educational environment, Louis has been influenced by a more liberal socialization experience than filial piety, and the consequence is a process of self-actualization. Louis is still under the continuous and pervasive influence of his father, even after going abroad; however, he has gained new perspectives after being exposed to new and more liberal socialization processes during his IHE experience in Canada. He devised an alternative education and career plan that he believes will accommodate both his own interest and father's. His tentative plan is to expand the family business from its local market in the PRC to international markets. To do so, he will acquire

more international business knowledge by earning a Master of Business Administration degree. He thinks that approaching the fashion industry from a business angle, instead of focusing on the design angle, is a win-win strategy for him and his father. I suggest that Louis's newly formed entrepreneurial mindset is the result of tactically balancing his socialization experiences between the Confucian perspective on filial piety and the Western liberal perspective on self-actualization. In other words, he tries to preserve his own interest while respecting his father's expectations.

Sam is similar to Louis in that he is adapting to an entrepreneurial mindset while abroad. However, Sam has embraced even more of a non-elite dispositional transformation and a process of tactical decision-making; he has already tested his entrepreneurial idea and is now an owner of a registered fitness and nutrition company in Canada. Sam's experience also contrasts sharply with Louis's in that he completely rejected his parents' opinions when making a critical entrepreneurial decision while abroad. In other words, the dynamism between the Confucian socialization of filial piety and the Western liberal socialization of self-actualization tipped dramatically toward the latter. His own description of this entrepreneurial experience as a "later evolution" suggests his significant mindset transformation when immersing himself in the liberal socialization experience in Canada. His transformation and entrepreneurial success involved standing his ground and even disobeying his parents.

Sam's IHE experience, particularly his entrepreneurial trajectory, is shaped by a non-elite disposition and a tactical navigation of the Canadian environment. Sam changed from wishing for a stable student life, an idea he expressed having received from his parents, to proactively re-defining the meaning of his education after going abroad. He explained taking

the pioneering step toward entrepreneurship during a critical stage of his study abroad as something that made him feel very insecure and stressed. His parents were actually against his entrepreneurial initiative, thinking that such activities would interfere with his studies. Not only could his parents not offer him any business advice given their different occupational backgrounds, but they also did provide Sam any financial assistance for his business idea.

However, Sam benefited from the freedom and diversity experienced on the YU campus and in Toronto. He claimed that the new environment has helped him overcome his fear of responsibility as well as to develop skills for critical thinking and independent decision-making. He told me that the skills he developed while in Canada feed directly into his leadership development as an entrepreneur. His entrepreneurial success suggests that despite the influence of Confucian socialization on his sense of filial piety, some students resolve their independent decision-making within new environments. Sam's experience challenges Confucian socialization—specifically, the reciprocal aspect of filial piety seen in Eric's narrative, in that Eric was motivated by his father's viewpoint and chose to follow his father's instructions, even at the cost of his personal interest. Sam's scenario challenges the findings by Waters (2008) of youth not prioritizing family concerns, and the findings by Bodycott & Lai (2012) of them not understanding and agreeing with parental intervention. The implication here is that understanding non-elite dispositions during IHE studies should account for different socialization experiences, both from family and new environments.

Strategic Decision-Making

Although tactical decision-making is the result of accommodating various interests and resource limitations, non-elite students can also demonstrate strategic decision-making. The strategies from non-elite dispositions differ from the strategies from elite dispositions, as illustrated through the narratives of Liz and Shirley. Although strategic, the non-elites are limited by resources and have to rely on exploring specific state policies and programs for institutional advantage. Terri and Sue are both studying in Canada as part of their degree studies in the PRC and their IHE is funded by the China Scholarship Council (CSC). They see IHE and the ability to gain overseas academic experience as playing an indispensable role in increasing their employment prospects in the Chinese academic environment. Targeting specific skills, usually academic, that they expect to obtain from their studies in Canada is their strategy for tackling an increasingly competitive professional landscape for academics in the PRC. Their strategy suggests that they are conforming to state regulations in order to gain an institutional advantage in academic hiring.

While the CSC aims to help Chinese graduate students gain academic experience abroad, there is an obligation attached to that particular IHE opportunity. Sue and Terri explained that all scholarship recipients need to sign a contract that obligates them to work in the Chinese academic environment for at least two years after they graduate from their home institutions. Such a contract suggests the intention of the PRC government to retain overseas-trained talent after investing in them with scholarships. However, this contractual obligation has been strategically explored by individuals as a safe path, conveniently paved for those who are capable of passing the rigorous funding screening before qualifying to receive state assistance

for employment after they graduate. Sue describes this as a "sweet arrangement" by the government that allows her to work in a university immediately after she graduates. In this sense, Sue and Terri's very strategic disposition regarding their IHE experience is observed through their intention to capitalize on the career-advancement benefits of the institutional regulation of their state-funded IHE. For Sue and Terri, studying abroad and the academic employment in the PRC is a career discourse facilitated by the PRC, utilizing its institutional structure to carve out a designated path for individuals. This corresponds to how strategy operates, as a rational ordering or an overarching framework for ruling institutions and their objectives (de Certeau, 1984). Regardless of the power dynamics between the state and individuals, in this case Sue and Terri have strategically identified and explored an institution-aided path rather than navigating their own careers during and after IHE.

Compromise Decision-Making

I continue diversifying my analyses of non-elite dispositions by integrating Yang's (2018) critique of the existing literature's rationalistic interpretation and theorization using Bourdieu's reproduction framework. Yang finds it problematic that the literature's underlying conception of IHE is one in which IHE is a "social alchemy" that facilitates the conversion between economic, social, and cultural capitals, thereby reproducing class advantage. Specifically, I adopt Yang's concept of "compromise", a condition of student mobilities that are shaped or determined by accommodating the "having-to" aspects of life in order to achieve certain goals. In other words, certain aspects need to be suspended during IHE for non-elite international students. This concept exposes the "messiness" behind a rationalist interpretation of IHE

decision-making and international student mobility by exploring the interactions between individuals and other parties, such as institutions and states. The "messiness" will not lessen the significance of current research that deploys a rationalist thinking; rather, it extends and diversifies our theorization using the Bourdieusian framework.

The narratives by Lisa and Sara reveal the "compromise" they had to make to pursue their personal goals, and did so by leaving their home country in order to avoid the educational and political obstacles posed by the PRC state. They chose to study abroad when they felt academically and politically excluded by the PRC state. To some extent, they were pushed out by the PRC, and IHE was an option for preserving their personal goals. Lisa initiated her idea of studying abroad when she was afraid her *gaokao* score would prevent her from getting into a top Chinese university, where she dreamed of studying biochemistry. For Sara, leaving the PRC to avoid the state's grip on political freedom so that she could promote her political voice has always been in the back of her mind. The idea of studying abroad urged her to take action, even though it meant putting her financial-wellbeing at stake. Unlike Sue and Terri who are conforming to the institutional regulations for a more promising career trajectory, which may help them reproduce or improve their class status, Lisa and Sara experienced "compromise", and chose IHE as an alternative way to achieve their respective goals. Their narratives highlight an element of pragmatism that has not been effectively captured by the institutional theorization by Bourdieusian on student dispositions, in that their experiences are less discernable for class reproduction or mobility.

By contrasting dispositions of Chinese elites and non-elites, we can better grasp some of the distinctive features of the decisions they make during their IHE. Elite dispositions are

fraught with unique cultural activities, finding an “healthy” education environment and mobilizing social capital to support their elite status. In contrast, non-elite Chinese families are approaching IHE differently. Due to resource limitations, non-elite dispositions shape three decision-making processes I learned. While some individuals are tactical in balancing between individual and parental expectations, others are strategic in exploring specific state programs to gain an institutional advantage. For others, some aspects of life have to be compromised or suspended in order to achieve specific goals through their IHE.

CHAPTER SIX — NAVIGATING THE EVOLVING INSTITUTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Many students from the People's Republic of China (PRC) are able to pursue their international higher education (IHE) after taking into consideration factors ranging from the individual to family to institution. Despite the importance of one's own interest and one's family situation in supporting them to study abroad, institutional factors such university admission and future employment prospects as an overseas returnee also influence the decision for IHE. *This chapter emphasizes that an evolving institutional landscape has emerged from the new trends in Chinese students getting involved in IHE, which reveals a dynamism between institutions, students and their families, and sheds light on IHE as a new site of competition between the Chinese elites and non-elites.*

Commonly mentioned among many of my interviewees, *gaokao* is a national exam for the purpose of university admission in the PRC, an endeavour of the state to officially rank millions of Chinese high school graduates each year (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Muthanna & Sang, 2015). *Gaokao* is increasingly important for understanding how non-elite Chinese students fare in IHE. This chapter reveals that some Chinese students had negative experiences with *gaokao*, and IHE becomes a privileged alternative for them in that they can avoid or even afford to fail *gaokao* but still get a precious IHE opportunity. Seeking IHE as an education alternative is exclusive to only those who can afford it and is a commonly practiced cultural strategy by the Chinese non-elite families to ensure that their children receive better educational and career opportunities. I will demonstrate that this cultural strategy has scalar

implications in that the non-elite Chinese families have adapted an international outlook to pursue education at the international level.

Gaokao also drives the expansion and marketization of international educational institutions at both the secondary and post-secondary levels in the PRC. While non-elites are enjoying their improved access to IHE, elites are exploiting an institutional hierarchy. The label of "wild chicken" to certain Western universities and among overseas-trained students in the PRC fosters the creation of an institutional hierarchy. On the one hand, this hierarchy counteracts the strategies by those families whose children are attending non-elite foreign universities. On the other hand, this hierarchy can be used by certain families to distinguish their status through the prestige of the universities their children attend.

Both *gaokao* and IHE expansion have implications that are reflected in a shift in a colloquialism, from "sea turtle" to "seaweed." These two metaphors have been developed in the PRC to refer to Chinese overseas returnees at different times. Centering my analyses on the changing meanings of these two metaphors, I argue that a changing socialization experience is happening in the PRC that is affecting how current and future Chinese returnees are being valued in the Chinese labour market. I then suggest that the new socialization experience reflects the PRC social system's resistance to change even after the non-elite Chinese families have attempted to improve their competitiveness in the PRC labour market through their participation in IHE.

Gaokao: The Nexus Between IHE and Chinese International Students

To say that *gaokao* only determines which universities Chinese high school graduates can apply for is an understatement; my interviewees explained that Chinese students' career potential and future quality of life often relies on their *gaokao* score. Nearly all my interviewees eventually chose to study in Canada because they either wanted to avoid *gaokao* altogether or took the exam but received a score that was not good enough to earn them admission into any of the desirable universities in the PRC.

Some of my interviewees associate negative experiences with the fierce competition and the pressure related to *gaokao*. For instance, Tony spoke of his health concerns during his high school years and the need to escape *gaokao* system by transferring to a US high school. He revealed his intense high school schedule in the PRC, from 7 am to 10:50 pm, and described his daily routine as feeling like one of the walking dead, dragging himself around, not actually knowing what he was doing. His parents were worried and initiated the idea of transferring him abroad to finish high school. Eventually, he was able to gain admission to UT, a top university in Canada.

Similarly, Lisa avoided *gaokao* not out of her inability to excel academically but because of her inability to adjust to its exam-centric system, which she worried would hinder her future career opportunities. After many mock tests, she lost her confidence in competing in *gaokao* and decided to start her preparation for IHE when international recruiters from YU visited her high school. She completed and enjoyed her undergraduate studies at YU, so she continued into a master's degree in Chemistry at the same university. The later successful stories—Tony being admitted to UT for undergraduate studies and Lisa admitted to YU for her current

master's studies—by the aforementioned two students were only possible after they decided to leave the PRC to avoid *gaokao* system. More importantly, Chinese students' relationship to *gaokao* system sheds light on how the PRC has become the largest international-student-sending country across the globe.

The ostensibly better educational turnout for students who study abroad becomes a concern when pondering the following questions: Who gets to study abroad? Who has the opportunity to bypass *gaokao* system to gain alternative education and potentially fulfill their best academic potential? Not all of the interviewees who participated in this research are from the elite families that belong to the top stratum of the PRC society. Most of them depict themselves as coming from "normal" families or working-class families when I asked about their family situations. Their general understanding of being "normal" is that their parents are corporate employees who need to budget IHE expenses, instead of treating these expenses as trivial. While this finding resonates with the knowledge from the literature that middle-class Chinese families are dominating the IHE participation, the statistics provided in much research nonetheless reveal a stratified sense of IHE, even after access to it significantly improved (Center for China Globalization, 2018; Chao et al., 2017; Hao, Wen, & Welch, 2016). Specifically, among the less than 2% of the nearly eight million Chinese high school graduates each year who have access to Western post-secondary education, 95% of whom are self-funded (Gu, 2015; Xinhua, 2017).

While it is important to acknowledge that not all students and their families want to avoid *gaokao* or consider IHE as a promising alternative to domestic higher education, the figures above are effective in conveying one message: that IHE remains a financially exclusive

form of education that is accessible to few people in the PRC. For instance, despite their successful stories in the Western education system after abandoning, or being "abandoned" by *gaokao* system, Lisa and Tony could choose to study abroad, which signals that they are part of the 2% group who enjoys the opportunity to seek alternative options for their education. As Shirley, one student who is personally interested in social stratification and the imbalanced education access in the PRC, comments: "many Chinese students fear the idea of studying abroad because they know how much money it takes…they understand that's not their lifestyle."

Avoiding *gaokao* and seeking IHE as an alternative to domestic higher education constitutes an emerging scalar strategy by the PRC middle-class that has implications for educational and spatial mobilities. Unsatisfied by the higher education at the national level, Chinese middle-class families have adopted a transnational outlook to pursue higher education at the international level. IHE is part of a non-elite strategy to become acclimatized to the cosmopolitan and worldly identity that was previously limited to elites. In addition to being affected by *gaokao*, most of my interviewees expressed that IHE is an opportunity for them to "see the world" and to change how they think. This emerging non-elite scalar strategy for education alternatives to *gaokao* reflects the general economic transformation of the middle class in the PRC, which challenges us to think that the current social stratification phenomenon taking place in the PRC is still producing instead of reproducing (Xiang & Shen, 2009). While Chinese elite families could continue to utilize their resource advantages during IHE for cultural and social reproduction, the previously excluded middle-class families are now the dominant group in IHE participation. This reflects the very core of Bourdieu's work on the transformative dispositions and the associated practices in resisting the existing social system. In this sense,

Chinese middle-class families' scalar strategy for an education alternative to *gaokao* has been successful in overcoming the elites' cultural monopoly and their reproductive cultural strategy through IHE.

Although the dominance of IHE participation by the Chinese middle class is conceived as transformative and improving social mobility, using Bourdieu's theorization, it can also be argued to be a newly established strategy by this new dominant group to strengthen their cultural and education mobility, leading to the entrenchment of social stratification in the PRC. In other words, both the transformative and the constraining effects of IHE on social stratification are present in the PRC context because of the rise of middle-class families. Their dual-effect, transforming and constraining the PRC's social stratification, can be understood using de Certeau's theorization of the fluidity between the dominant and subordinate groups in a stratified society.

De Certeau's delineates between producer-consumer and strategy-tactic, and explains that consumers do not just submissively follow the institutional structures strategically generated by producers (de Certeau, 1984; p. 34-39).[42] Instead, consumers tactically manipulate their surrounding environments through everyday actions and activities. Chinese middle-class families have not remained silent as the elite's progeny were gaining institutional power and employment advantages from their IHE. Instead, the middle-class families have been active in overcoming their resource limitations and becoming the new dominant force in IHE participation. In this regard, Chinese middle-class families have transitioned from their

[42] De Certeau's definition of consumers include not just the everyday buyers and users. He broadly defines consumers as the ordinary people who possess little to no institutional power and are influenced by producers.

consumer position to being producers of the new cultural strategy of seeking IHE as a *gaokao* alternative.

This transition reflects de Certeau's teachings that producers and consumers sometimes inhabit the same domain, which suggests a level of fluidity or a dialogical relationship between producers and consumers (de Certeau, 1984, p. 30-34). Echoing Waters' (2006) point about learning across spaces becoming the new geography of cultural capital, I conceptualize IHE as a new cultural site for competition between Chinese elite and non-elite families through their international mobility regime for education. By adapting a transnational outlook on pursuing higher education at the international level, the Chinese non-elites have significantly improved their spatial and economic mobility for education and continue to provide their children with more educational opportunities, emerging as the major force shaping the landscape of IHE participation.

G*aokao* adds complexity to my analysis about this cultural strategy, particularly from the Chinese non-elite side. Although many of my interviewees do consider their IHE experience beneficial to their future careers, they doubt that it will make substantial contributions to their families. Their accounts intrigue me, leading me to ponder the effectiveness of IHE for institutional power. This situation echoes another theoretical aspect by de Certeau, in which strategy is not just for the end product (e.g., social reproduction and social mobility), it is also the way that users operate and appropriate structure (de Certeau, 1984, p. 52-60). In other words, what counts as producers' strategies are both the institutional outcomes and the mechanisms leading to such outcomes. Even though my interviewees do not conceive of their IHE opportunity as an effective institutional strategy, their families' cultural strategy to avoid

gaokao, to seek an alternative to domestic higher education, and to become acclimatized to the cosmopolitan and worldly culture, indicate their transnational spatial and educational mobilities. Regardless of whether these mobilities will lead to institutional power, they are a privilege that excludes the larger student population of the PRC. This contributes to our understanding of Chinese middle-class families' new cultural strategy, by thinking of their privilege more than the acquisition of institutional outcomes, and also as establishing education alternatives to *gaokao* to ensure their children will have more educational and career opportunities.

Institutional Expansion and the Rise of "Wild Chicken"

Individuals and institutions are simultaneously adapting to *gaokao*. Here, I specify institutions as educational institutions at both the secondary and post-secondary levels. The expansion of international education at the two levels is encouraged by the increasing demands for *gaokao* alternatives, including those who under-perform on *gaokao*. In this context, both students' families and educational institutions are responding to *gaokao*, greatly improving access to IHE, and international education generally, in the PRC. However, the improved access to IHE only caters those Chinese families who can afford it, reflecting the financial exclusivity of studying abroad. Moreover, this improved access to studying abroad fosters a stratified landscape of IHE participation by distinguishing overseas-trained Chinese students at the post-secondary level. According to my interviewees, one method of distinguishing among Chinese students who have graduated from or are pursuing IHE is to label someone as the "wild chicken" graduate—an institutional hierarchy commonly mentioned by my interviewees. This institutional hierarchy

has profound consequences for Chinese international students and returnees' future career prospects in the PRC labour market.

Chinese families begin preparing for IHE early by having their children study abroad at the secondary level. Similar to Tony, who transferred to the US for high school, Amanda and Eric attended an international high school in the PRC that offered them recognizable credits in the Western education system. Louis also earned Canadian high school credits in the PRC during his early high school years and he transferred to Canada later. Lee's story revealed even earlier preparation. Lee's parents enrolled him in an international high school in Canada immediately after middle school, knowing that his chances of getting into a competitive Chinese high school for later university admission were slim. According to him, the competition for university entrance starts as early as elementary school for some students. For him, the *zhongkao* (中考), the high school entrance exam in the PRC that precedes *gaokao,* became a good indicator of whether he should proceed to Chinese high school or go abroad. His parents contacted New Oriental, a study abroad agency, after his *zhongkao* score was revealed, realizing that ending up in a third-tier university in three years after taking *gaokao* was not as wise as letting him to go abroad earlier. Lee's story demonstrates that the marathon competition for prestigious Chinese university starts earlier than high school for Chinese students. Knowing the potential risk of ending up in a mediocre university in the PRC and facing dim career prospects afterwards, early preparation for IHE became a better option for Lee.

These student examples suggest that international education at the secondary level is in high demand in the PRC, usually driven by *gaokao*, and has become a conventional path for families that plan ahead for IHE and to avoid *gaokao*. According to Robinson and Guan (2012),

the prevalence of Chinese students studying in Western colleges and universities has led to the rapid growth of international secondary schools in the PRC, which provide curriculum programs more aligned with Western post-secondary institutions. The CCG 2018 report reveals that the increasing rate of Chinese students entering international high schools has outpaced that of college attendance. The continuously growing demand for international secondary schools in the PRC is partially driven by the competitiveness, rigidity, and toxic level of stress from *gaokao*, which continues to raise concerns even after several education reforms (Zhao, Selman, & Haste, 2015). Chinese students such as Lisa and Lee escaped the PRC's exam-centric education for their anticipated better education and career paths. Similarly, Tony described his high school experience in the PRC as that of the "walking dead" and felt it necessary to quit.

Chinese students attending international secondary schools demonstrate their transnational, educational, and economic mobilities to avoid *gaokao* and to prepare in advance for IHE, which becomes an incentive for institutional expansion; however, the interactions between individuals and institutions create possibilities to enhance social stratification in the PRC. In this case, *gaokao* drives the development of international high schools and is a critical component in understanding the enormous population of Chinese international students overseas. Yamato and Bray (2006) discover that the interaction between the international school sector and the market place is exceptionally evident in the PRC. According to the authors, Chinese parents' increasingly powerful economic strength provides the economic incentives for Western and domestic institutions, education boards, and educational organizations to intervene. However, the supply and demand relationship for international schools comes at a cost in that it caters only to the families who can afford it.

Consequently, the exclusive nature of this supply and demand relationship facilitates the emergence of a stratified landscape of international education by providing alternatives to the *gaokao* and international educational opportunities to only those who can afford it. Even Lisa, who is one of the Chinese students who did not attend an international high school but wanted to avoid *gaokao*, was connected with YU because of an institutional cooperation agreement through which the university's international ambassadors went to recruit at her high school. This financial exclusivity entrenches social stratification in the PRC by ensuring that the new mode of production—strategies and dispositions associated with IHE—by the rising middle-class families in the PRC is inaccessible to the larger Chinese population.

Besides the expansion of secondary schools in responding to *gaokao*, post-secondary institutions within and outside of the PRC are also taking actions to better accommodate Chinese students' concerns about their *gaokao* outcomes, expanding the demand for IHE. Even after admission to a university in the PRC, some Chinese students still have the option to study abroad, which can actually be more convenient than going abroad directly. Graduate students Katie and Shirley revealed that their undergraduate IHE experiences were part of the *2+2* program established between their home institutions in the PRC and Canadian institutions. The *2+2* programs and other similar joint programs are a form of institutional collaboration between universities from different countries and joined partly because of the commercial motivation from the significant international tuition fee (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

Katie and Shirley explained that they chose the *2+2* program primarily because of their underperformance during *gaokao* and because of the guaranteed admission to a partner

foreign university without having to take an IELTS[43] (English-language) test requirement. Initially, they ended up in what they described as a third-tier university in the PRC for undergraduate studies. They were able to finish their four-year bachelor's degree abroad after completing their first two years in the PRC. According to them, many PRC universities nowadays are establishing similar programs to attract students whose parents can afford the significantly higher tuition cost than domestic universities. These two students have now both successfully transitioned into their respective master's studies, and their joint programs functioned as a springboard for them to jump out of the Chinese education system after their under-performance on *gaokao*— albeit at a significant financial cost— and into a valuable IHE opportunity.

With a similar experience with the joint program, Sam started his undergraduate study at YU after he completed two years of English training at the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU). His IHE experience is part of a cooperation agreement between the BFSU and YU that conveniently waived the standardized English test for him. Sam admitted that he had little confidence in passing the language requirement by himself, and English skills remain a main obstacle for his studies in Canada. In Sam's case, the institutional connection between the two universities allows him to have an IHE opportunity by waiving the language test. Sam's later development of an entrepreneurial mindset and his success would not have been realized without the institutional assistance from the two universities.

Even though more Chinese families are strategizing their way into IHE, they are attending a wide range of Western universities in terms their global rankings and tuitions. A

[43] IELTS is an abbreviation for International English Language Testing System, an international standardized test for English language proficiency.

hierarchy arises when current and future Chinese students and returnees are assessed based on the global rankings and the university's reputation in the PRC. While this hierarchy could negatively impact some, it can also be exploited as an institutional advantage for distinction. The increasingly common private investment in IHE by Chinese families has fueled the IHE marketization of post-secondary institutions, which in turn has contributed to the rise of the label of the "wild chicken" universities (野鸡大学), diminishing their graduates' chance of employment in the PRC (Qin, 2016).

"Wild chicken" universities were described by Louis and Shirley as "credential mills" that purposefully lower their admission and graduation standards in order to attract more international students, typically those with low academic performance and from middle-class families. However, these universities are popular among the less academically competent Chinese students who nonetheless wish to study abroad, as long as their parents can afford it. The emergence of "wild chicken" universities is the result of institutional expansion—the larger education massification and commodification process taking place globally as the result of universities' expansion strategies (Cantwell, 2015). Western universities are incented by the higher tuition fees international students pay to compensate for the shrinking revenue from domestic tuition and other sources (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Montsion, 2018). Western universities joined by education agencies and other education businesses are actively reaching out to Chinese students, presenting them with ample studying abroad "opportunities," including the previously discussed 2+2 programs and the partnered international high schools within and outside of the PRC.

"Wild chicken" universities reduces the effectiveness of the strategies of families whose children attend non-elite universities. My interviewees explained that these universities are blamed for admitting more and more mediocre and low-quality students before pouring them back into the PRC labour market. Meanwhile, the PRC-based employers are becoming increasingly aware of concerns about the quality of returnees and are becoming more selective of candidates' credentials, skills, and experiences (Hao, Wen & Welch, 2016; Zweig & Han, 2010). Consequently, the negative representation of "wild chicken" universities as the result of institutional expansion, together with the growing number of returnees, dilute the competitiveness of current and future returnees, reducing the effectiveness of the IHE strategies by many Chinese families. These students and their parents could be bitter-sweet, for they are stuck in a dilemma, knowing the concerns about their future employment prospects but nonetheless content with their access to IHE.

By labeling certain Western universities "wild chickens", an institutional hierarchy is established, which facilitates the creation of a stratified landscape of IHE and distinction among Chinese international students. Regardless of whether students who are attending elite universities are consciously capitalizing on their institutional advantage or not, the institutional hierarchy is operational and effective. Eric and Amanda demonstrated this through their discussions of their internship experiences, whereby they sailed smoothly through the interview processes simply because their status of being UT students. In contrast, many of the interviewees from YU considered their future credentials as only mediocre; although YU is not recognized a "wild chicken" university by my interviewees, the YU students certainly consider themselves as less outstanding than the UT students.

The institutional hierarchy based on reputation also exists in students' opinions about universities and their anticipated employment prospects in the PRC. I use two more student examples to demonstrate the importance of the public's perceptions of Western universities in the PRC and students' strategies in avoiding being referred to as a "wild chicken" graduate. According to Mary, a fourth-year Economics student at YU, her education agent provided her with a list of universities, ranked and categorized based on criteria including admission standards, tuition fees, and program strengths, when selecting her school. She noticed that the agent was intentionally selling her on universities of which she had never heard. She soon discovered through her own web-browsing research that many of these foreign institutions recruit through education agencies in the PRC in order to reach admission quotas. She eventually chose YU based on her own judgement after visiting many online forums to double-check the university's legitimacy to ensure that the public perception of it in the PRC was not that it was labeled a "wild chicken." She emphasized that public perceptions in the PRC of foreign universities is extremely important for someone like her who hopes to return home immediately after graduation.

Shirley admitted that she was a graduate from a "wild chicken" Canadian university for her undergraduate studies and decided to focus entirely on university rankings when selecting her graduate school, fearing she might also be referred to as a "wild chicken" graduate in the future. She described the phenomenon of "wild chicken" as a reflection of "education capitalism." Her explanation is that as Chinese international students attract more attention from Western universities, IHE is also increasingly advertised and sold internationally as a commodity. Her IHE experience suggests her strategic steps in transitioning out of the "wild

chicken" university into UT. Since she did not achieve a high *gaokao* score, her university options at home were limited. She first entered a *2+2* joint program at a third-tier university in the PRC, which had very low admission requirements but high tuition, before moving onto finishing her undergraduate studies at a "wild chicken" university. However, she was not proud of studying abroad at such a university. She admitted that during her MA admission process, she prioritized university reputation and ranking over everything else, even after she received two fully-funded packages from two other renowned universities in Canada. She explained that pursuing her master's degree at UT, a more prestigious university among her offers but only with partial funding, will salvage her reputation and save her from being labelled a "wild chicken" graduate in the future.

The Shift from "Sea Turtle" to "Seaweed"

The changing metaphors from "sea turtle" to "seaweed" accounted by my interviewees reflect a shift in a broader system concerning the quality and employment prospects of current and future Chinese overseas returnees. I conceptualize this broader system as a socialization experience within the PRC, specifically how people develop and share similar conceptions about overseas returnees' employment prospects. Based on my interviewees' opinions, I revealed two nuances—returnees' inability to pass *gaokao* and their inability to readapt into the PRC work environment after graduation—that are believed to be chipping away at current and future returnees' employment advantages in the PRC. These nuances reflect the overarching public perceptions about the decreasing value of IHE and overseas returnees, captured by the metaphor transition. They also suggest the broader socialization experience in resisting

structural changes even after the non-elite Chinese families have attempted to better themselves through IHE.

From "sea turtle" to "seaweed," the changing metaphors revealed from my interviewees' socialization experiences about how returnees are being valued in the PRC indicates a substantial decline in their current and future employment prospects. "Sea turtle" is an original nickname for Chinese overseas returnees who are believed to possess outstanding work competencies and prominent employment prospects (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Zweig & Han, 2010). "Seaweed" connotes the opposite of those positive qualities for returnees and has been discussed by many of my interviewees, such as Amy, who expressed her disappointment and concerns about the deteriorating quality of current Chinese international students and returnees (Hu & Cairns, 2017; Wang, Wong, & Sun, 2006).

The metaphor change happened about a decade ago. According to Louie (2006), "sea turtle"—what he refers to in his writing as *Haigui*[44]—started to appear around the years 2003 and 2004 on many websites and in media discussions and literature. Although Chinese started studying abroad long before this period, Louie explains that this is the time when overseas graduates began to seriously respond to the PRC's preferential policies for oversees returnees. The "sea turtle" time, when the socialization experience, led by the state's preferential policies, provided a strong narrative to the PRC public about the glamorous returns from IHE. At that time, many Chinese families tended to believe that sending their children abroad was an effective solution to guaranteeing better employment and a better future. However, with more returnees, the "sea turtle" status gradually declined, from little "sea turtle" to "seaweed." This

[44] *Haigui* is the Chinese translation for "sea turtle."

changing colloquialism is a reflection of the changing socialization experience about the shared conceptions of returnees' employment prospects in the PRC.

The changing socialization experience, reflected by the metaphors and the declining perceptions of overseas education, suggests the PRC social system's resistance to change, even after non-elite Chinese families attempted to better themselves through their improved economic, spatial, and educational mobilities for a better access to IHE. Specifically, the "old" advantage of being an overseas returnee has now been de-valued, as reflected by the "seaweed" and "wild chicken" labels. These labels facilitate the distinction among Chinese overseas returnees, with the help of an institutional hierarchy, discrediting the IHE experiences of those attending non-elite Western institutions. This suggests a re-stabilizing of the social structure, which has been challenged by the emerging power of non-elite Chinese families in the context of IHE participation and its associated employment advantage.

This changing socialization has implications for *gaokao*. While avoiding *gaokao* has been discussed previously as a strategy for more and more middle-class Chinese families, it also has repercussions. As Louie (2006) points out, the dramatic switch from "sea turtle" to "seaweed" reflects a change in the PRC public's view, going from seeing IHE as an extraordinary scholastic achievement to seeing it as an easy alternative for *gaokao* escapers. Since *gaokao* is a state-led evaluation of Chinese students' scholastic competencies, the competitiveness of such an exam is valorized on a national scale, which has a direct impact on how Chinese students—domestic and international, as well as current and those who already graduated—are being valued and judged in the PRC labour market (Zhu, 2012).

The fierce academic competition and the stress from preparing for *gaokao* are steering the PRC socialization experience, narrating studying abroad as an easy way-out of the PRC *gaokao* system, even if it has been proven to be a better decision for some of my interviewees. In Eric 's opinion, the declining reputation of international graduates has led to an increased employment competition from domestic graduates, particularly those from the prestigious 211 and 985 institutions. His opinion is supported by Fang and Li's (2010) example of the Chinese C9 League universities, which are also mentioned by Yang and Welch (2012) as the Chinese version of the Ivy League.

This changing socialization also has implications for individual competency. Specifically, returnees are struggling to re-adjust to the PRC work environment after they have graduated from their foreign institutions and returned to the PRC (Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2017; Louie, 2006; Zweig & Fang, 2014). Their struggle is partially caused by returnees' employment disadvantages and failure to devise corresponding strategies upon returning. Both Howard's uncle and Eric's father have learned from their extensive hiring experiences with international graduates that hiring preferences should be given to domestic graduates. According to Eric, his father refuses to hire two types of overseas returnees who are described as "watery"[45], a parallel description in Mandarin for being flawed. The "watery" types include those who graduate from a one-year master's program, which incurs employer's suspicion about the extent of knowledge returnees have acquired during such a short period of IHE experience, and those who return to the PRC after graduation without any work experience abroad. Therefore, these returnees are considered far less competitive than domestic graduates from top ranking

[45] It is a slang in Mandarin to describe something or someone who is not qualified or inadequate to live up to conventional standards.

universities in the PRC who are preferred for their success in *gaokao* and the knowledge about the PRC local market. Similarly, Howard expressed his concern about the "un-acclimatization" phenomenon, in which overseas returnees are unable to translate their knowledge learned from overseas for application to the PRC work environment. Based on his uncle's hiring experience for accounting graduates, "un-acclimatization" occurs as the result of the different knowledge, national laws, and business standards Chinese students learn from foreign universities that are sometimes in conflict with the PRC situation.

Amy provided another example of students' lack of competencies as a primary contributor to the "seaweed" and "wild chicken" phenomena. Amy used the example of her cousin to express her intense disappointment in the plunging quality of current Chinese IHE graduates. Her cousin studied in the United States for five years and returned to the PRC. Amy considers the ability to communicate in English as a minimum expectation from a "sea turtle," but she was astounded by her returnee cousin's poor oral English skills. She commented on her cousin's IHE outcome as shameful and used the term *DuJin* to describe those unqualified Chinese students like her cousin who studied abroad but gold-coated themselves, living underneath the halo of being internationally educated but returning to the PRC without showing any substantial personal and educational improvement.

An evolving institutional landscape is intertwined with the education and career trajectories of Chinese students from both elite and non-elite backgrounds. Three interconnected institutional elements—*gaokao*, expansion of international education institutions, and a metaphoric shift in how returnees are described—are especially important for Chinese international students. While students' negative experiences with *gaokao* are

driving the expansion of international education within and outside of the PRC, seeking IHE as an alternative to domestic education is becoming a new strategy for non-elites. Chinese elites are responding by taking advantage of an institutional hierarchy. The emerging phenomenon of "seaweed" and "wild chicken" might suggest how the PRC social structure's changes to resist efforts from non-elite families for upward social mobility. In this way, IHE can be understood as a new cultural site for competition between Chinese elites and non-elites, which reflects the dynamics of a changing social structure at play in the PRC.

CHAPTER SEVEN — CONCLUSION

Today, students around the world are travelling abroad to pursue their international higher education (IHE), among which those from the People' Republic of China (PRC) comprise the largest group (Center for China and Globalization, 2016; Kim & Kwak, 2019). The objective of this research is to investigate the entanglements between Chinese international students' IHE experiences, their family situations, as well as institutional influences, which co-constitutively shape their perceptions about future career trajectories and social position in the PRC. Bearing in mind the dynamism of IHE—families of different backgrounds make the same decision to send their children to study abroad amid a stratified landscape of IHE participation—I have mapped out the dispositions of Chinese international students by examining how their education experiences and aspirations reflect and show indications of shaping the PRC's existing social system.

Based on the IHE narratives of 19 Chinese international students studying at two different universities in Toronto, I have identified and analyzed the individual and family factors contributing to and constraining their education aspirations and future planning, and have organized their dispositions into elite and non-elite categories. I have identified three influential institutional factors shaping my interviewees' IHE migration experiences and their future planning—*gaokao*, institutional expansion at the secondary and post-secondary levels during IHE commercialization in the PRC, and a shift in a colloquialism reflecting a substantial decline of overseas returnees' employment prospects in the PRC. Based on these findings, I have argued that the contrasting dispositions and the socialization experiences of Chinese elite and non-elite families lead to their divergent IHE migration experiences, unveiling their power

negotiation through an evolving institutional landscape in the PRC. This stratified landscape is observable through the different scalar strategies and international mobility regimes adapted, respectively, by elite and non-elite Chinese families.

The scalar strategies are utilized differently by the elite and non-elite Chinese families. Non-elite Chinese families have adapted a transnational outlook to pursue higher education at the international level, as opposed to only at a national level, which was the case before as the result of resource limitations. Their improved spatial and economic mobility for higher education provides precious IHE opportunities as an alternative to domestic education for their children when they fail or want to avoid taking *gaokao*. Elite Chinese families, feeling challenged by Chinese middle-class families' dominance in IHE participation and the process of IHE commercialization in the PRC, attempt to regain their privilege by establishing distinctions among Chinese international students. Their scalar strategy is formed by exploring an institutional hierarchy, looking to avoid universities that are non-elite or referred to as "wild chicken" universities. These two scalar strategies are the dispositional responses by the elite and non-elite Chinese families to the changing socialization experiences related to IHE. Their dispositions and the associated ways of approaching IHE contribute to a stratified landscape of IHE participation and reveal their power negotiation through IHE.

International mobility is valued and actively pursued by both elites and non-elites. While elites are more interested in outward and horizontal mobility, non-elites are more in need of upward and vertical mobility. The difference in the international mobility regimes by elites and non-elites is observed through their dispositions and the contrasting manners of approaching IHE, which lead to divergent IHE migration experiences and reflect a stratified landscape of IHE.

Elites' cultural mobility manifests in their accumulation of specific cultural capital—"tastes" and "highbrow cultural activity participation"—in order to enhance their social success. Elites' social mobility is strengthened by elite socialization processes, which help them reduce the importance of career concerns; as such, elite socialization is part of the elite conversion formula between cultural, economic, and social capital accumulation, to secure resource advantages. Both the cultural and social mobility by elites resonates with what de Certeau defines as a strategy for maintaining an institutional order and power by the producer or the dominant group in society.

In contrast, non-elite dispositions involve overcoming obstacles or exploring the systems in order to maximize their investment in IHE or reach certain goals. These non-elite attributes of participating in IHE reflect de Certeau's definition of tactic as that which is practiced by subordinate social groups. However, a tactic is non-static, indicating non-elite or middle-class Chinese families' proactive way of challenging the producers and negotiating power. Specifically, I have identified three decision-making processes based on non-elite dispositions: tactical balancing between children's and parents' expectations; relying on specific state policies and programs for institutional advantage; and, accommodating the having-to aspects of life in order to pursue one's own interest. These suggests the fluidity between the producer and consumer identity and the non-elite Chinese families' capacity to achieve a dominant position in the landscape of IHE participation.

Limitations

Due to the time and resource limitations for a master's thesis, this research focuses only on the Chinese international students within Toronto. Although Toronto is the largest metropolitan area and attracts the most Chinese international students in Canada, its population of international students in general might not be representative of the international student population in other Canadian provinces. From a financial point of view, the cost of living in Toronto is higher than in many other Canadian cities. Similarly, international tuition fees are generally higher in Ontario than in other provinces (Statistics Canada, 2019). Therefore, less affluent Chinese families may choose to send their children to attend schools in other Canadian cities and provinces. From an immigration point of view, Ontario is among the most competitive provinces for the immigration categories that are available to international students (Lu & Hou, 2015). As a result, student recruitment from only Toronto and possibly other parts of Ontario could yield a skewed result, as compared to recruitment that included other Canadian provinces, where students may choose to go specifically because of the less competitive immigration channels.

Although my personal connections to this research topic have been invaluable in helping me with the interview process and providing unique insights, the analyses would benefit from collaboration with other researchers. In other words, while I maintain the merits of sharing identities and experiences with the interviewees, I also emphasize the value of getting a third-party analytical opinion. My Chinese international student identity, my experience coming from a middle-class family, and how I perceive my IHE in relation to my family and future, could possibly create blinders for how I analyze the narratives of other Chinese international students

who have different or contrasting lived experiences. For example, I might have over-emphasized the analysis of non-elite students, unconsciously seeing their experiences as more important and complex. My point here is not at all to discredit my personal connections to this research nor to advocate for the obvious merit of getting a third opinion for writing; instead, I believe having someone with different dispositions and socialization experiences from mine could possibly extend the analytical breadth and depth from different angles.

Suggestions for Future Investigation

I suggest future research could explore more of the analytical potential using the Bourdieu-de Certeau framework suggested in this research. I originally grounded my theoretical framework only within the Bourdiesian theorization once I discovered it in a literature exercise and found it appealing; however, I realized its analytical limitations for the less strategic and rationalistic aspects within students' IHE narratives once I started conducting interviews. Even though I still situate Bourdieu's work on dispositions and socialization as the starting point and foundation for my analyses, I have experienced the fruitfulness of bridging them to de Certeau's teachings about strategy-tactic and produce-consumer. I encourage future researchers to adapt the Bourdieusian framework to complement other theorizations for a more flexible theoretical framework pertaining to their specific research contexts. Attention to nuances is particularly important for my research, considering the changing landscape of IHE participation as the result of the emerging influence from the Chinese middle-class families, as well as the diverse ways—e.g. negotiation, strategy, and compromise—of approaching IHE demonstrated by these families.

I suggest that researchers who focus on the Chinese dispositions for IHE participation, and IHE migration in general, dedicate more attention to unravelling the diversity within non-elite dispositions and education migration behaviours. Revealed in this research are the tactical, strategic, and compromise decision-making processes. Considering the small sample size of this research, 19 interviewees, I anticipate more diverse and complex decision-making could be captured from Chinese middle-class families' IHE migration. Middle-class families from the PRC are a dynamic cohort at the intersection of being privileged and non-privileged. Not only do they experience resource disadvantages compared to elite Chinese families, during IHE, but they also demonstrate the privilege of seeking alternatives to domestic education as compared to the larger PRC population. The dominant IHE participation from the PRC middle-classes has been and will be the major force shaping the future landscape of IHE and its implications for social stratification in the PRC. Future research, particularly quantitative and mixed-method studies investigating a broader set of the population, will help determine the broader application of the aforementioned three categories of decision-making by non-elites in and beyond the context of Chinese participation of IHE.

I also suggest that future research incorporate some quantitative analyses to strengthen the comparative angle and to better understanding the stratified landscape of IHE participation. This research selected two universities, the University of Toronto (UT) and the York University (YU), based on a literature review-based assumption that elite university attendance is associated with social class privilege and social stratification (Findlay et al., 2012; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). I was able to identify two elite students from UT, based on their unique expressions and experiences such as "tastes" and "highbrow cultural activity," that could be

linked to Bourdieu's theorization. Other interviewees who were also attending UT, which in this research is considered an elite university, did not explicitly reveal much information suggesting elite status. Additionally, it was difficult to draw clear distinctions about the social class differences between the YU students. This research could have benefited from a quantitative survey that could collect information such as family income and monthly expenditure abroad for the Chinese international students attending the two universities. This quantitative information would allow for a more direct comparison of factors such as family income for assessing social status, as well as a comparison between and within the elite and non-elite student populations.

Broader Implications

While this research mainly discusses the relationship between IHE and social stratification in the PRC, the findings suggest nuances for Canada and other student-receiving countries in the West for their future strategies for international student recruitment. As shown in this research, as the perceived value of IHE decreases and recognition of the PRC's domestic universities increases, the future may see a rigorous student recruitment competition between the universities in the PRC and overseas. In order to increase the competitiveness of Western universities like UT and YU, particularly the latter, given its lower international prestige, Western universities need to develop educational and marketing strategies targeting specific skills that can be immediately translated into an employment advantage. Additionally, Western universities could help strengthen the recognition of studying abroad beyond the obtainment of immediate career rewards. Some of my interviewees showed that their mindset changes and

self-actualization while abroad became a game-changing aspect of their IHE experience. These socialization experiences and the subsequent dispositional behaviours can be hard to visualize during the initial period of decision-making about studying abroad.

Although the demographic focus of this research is on Chinese students, its findings and analyses could also be applied to other emerging international-student-sending countries such as Bangladesh, India, and Vietnam. As the latest data from the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) suggest, India has just surpassed the PRC by 5%, becoming the leading international-student-sending country in Canada; the growth rates of international student populations in Canada from Bangladesh and Vietnam are approximately 50% between 2017 and 2018 (CBIE, 2019). Similar to the PRC, these are also developing countries that are experiencing a growing middle class as their economies prosper. As a result, the analyses and arguments I have constructed around the dispositions and socialization processes between the elite and non-elite Chinese families, as well as their suggested impacts on the changing social stratification at the societal level, could be useful for future research that focuses on other developing economies.

The geographical and transnational implications of IHE explored in this research reinforce how crucial it is to take into consideration internationalization, globalization, and institutional influence in future research on education, even when the focus remains at the national level. As I have shown, *gaokao*, as a national exam used for university entrance assessment in the PRC, has a fundamental impact on the migration experience of Chinese international students in Canada and likely on other student-receiving countries. The opposite is also true, that the national scholastic assessments in Western countries, like the Scholastic

Aptitude Test (SAT) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) in the United States, as well as the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the United Kingdom, are having transnational impacts. These are the national standardized tests utilized by the two countries for university admissions for their domestic students; however, they have already been integrated into the path to studying abroad by international students. As my interviewees demonstrated through their experiences, they started their international education as early as middle school and continued into undergraduate and graduate studies. As such, I encourage future education research, particularly on the large academic assessment systems, to adapt transnationally.

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List of Interviewees

- Amanda. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 25 November 2018
- Amy. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 5 September 2018
- Eric. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 9 November 2018
- Gwen. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 22 September 2018
- Howard. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 6 September 2018
- John. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 13 September 2018
- Katie. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 21 September 2018
- Mary. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 10 September 2018
- Lee. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 9 November 2018
- Lisa. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 4 September 2018
- Liz. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 1 December 2018
- Louis. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 27 November 2018
- Sam. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 19 September 2018
- Sara. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 24 November 2018
- Shirley. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 29 November 2018
- Sue. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 1 October 2018
- Terri. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 20 September 2018
- Tom. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 6 September 2018
- Tony. (fictitious). Interview conducted in Toronto on 17 November 2018

APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Studying abroad: social mobility or social reproduction? Examining the strategies of Chinese international students in Toronto.

Interview Questions for Chinese International Students

Guanglong Pang, MA Student, Department of Geography, York University

Information about these interview questions: This document gives you an idea of what I would like to learn about your international education experiences; how does your education, family situation and Chinese labour market prospects together shape your perceptions about your future career trajectory in China. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not just "yes or no" answers). Because of this, the exact wording of my questions may change a little. Sometimes I will use other short questions to clarify what you have told me or if I need more information during the interview, including when we are talking, such as: "So, you are saying that …?), to get additional details ("Please tell me more?"), or to learn about what you think or feel about something that you have mentioned ("Why do you think that is…?").

1) Please tell me about you. Why did you decide to come to Canada for your university education? Why did you choose York University (or University of Toronto) and the current program of study?

2) What do you think are the main differences between studying at a university in Canada and in China? What are the skills and experiences you want to gain from your university education in Canada? How do you plan on using these skills and experiences for your future career plans? Please share some example(s) with me.

3) Would you consider working in China after you complete your education in Canada? Why? Do you think that your Canadian education will give you a competitive edge in the Chinese job market compared to students who graduate from a university in China? Please explain. What are other factors that you think can improve your employability in China?

4) Please tell me about your family situation. What are your parents' professional and education background? What are their expectations for your education? Have they, or other family members, influenced your decision to study in Canada? Are they active in helping you to navigate your time in Canada? To what extent do you think their opinions and support are influencing your career aspirations and success now and in the future?

5) After you finish your education in Canada, what role do you see yourself playing in your family?
Will your family members help you after graduation, if at all? Or will your family members need your support after graduation, if at all? Do they have social connections that can be useful to your job search in the Chinese labour market?

6) How have your prospects in the PRC labour market influenced your education in Canada (i.e. university choice, program and level of study) and future career planning? How important are PRC's labour policies and other factors for international returnees?

7) As a potential graduate of a Canadian university, what do you know about working in China? How do you think China-based employers view overseas returnees as potential employees? Are these employers viewing returnees more favourably compared to domestic graduates? Do you have strategies to increase your employability when more international graduates decide to return back to the PRC? If so, what are they?

8) Is there anything important that I forgot to ask? Is there anything else that you think I need to know about your education experiences in Canada and your future career plans?
END